

KARINA BANKS



I'VE WATCHED
YOU DIE



ACADEMY FOR GODS AND FREAKS

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BOOK 1

KARINA BANKS

I've Watched You Die

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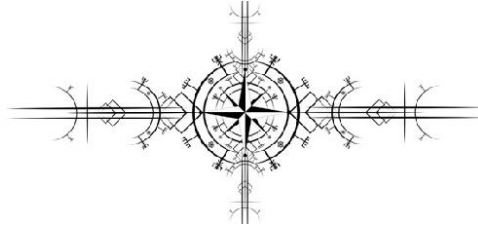
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ONE



A shrieking, earsplitting horn blares down the street. I startle and nearly drop my phone on the hot concrete sidewalk. I look up to find a red truck, its paint chipped and scratched, careening out of control. The smell of burned rubber permeates the air as the truck's tires slide sideways over hot asphalt, the wheels locked in place by screeching brake pads.

No. No, no, *no*.

I pinch my cheek, hard. It doesn't work. I don't wake up.

The familiar sound of the roaring diesel engine vibrates in my skull. I watch in horror as the truck skids through dappled shadows cast by trees lining the street. Too fast. It's going way too fast. I know, before I turn my head, what I will see.

Panic grips my chest with cold claws, squeezing my lungs in a vice-like grip. I can't breathe. *Damn it*. This isn't real. It can't be. Why am I hallucinating again? I already took this ride once today, in front of my entire calculus class. I'm not thrilled to be on the nightmare train a second time within a few hours.

The truck careens out of control and rockets toward the boy waiting at the stoplight.

"Watch out!" Everything moves in slow motion as he stands there like a deer in headlights, watching the truck barrel toward him. My legs are ahead of my brain, and I run. My shoes pound against the pavement. I know I'll be too late to save him, but I have to try. I *always* have to try.

I can't bear to watch *him* die twice in one day.

I cry out when his shout of pain, and the crunch of breaking bones, fills my ears. His body flies through the air, his limbs twisted into unnatural angles. The acrid taste of bile coats my tongue. Of course, nothing has changed. I never make it in time to shove him out of the way. He never hears my shouted warning. I've seen this all happen before—many, many times—and I know me playing the savior is not the way this ends.

The boy, no—the soon-to-be-dead body—is laying on the pavement in a spreading pool of blood. I kneel beside him, hands flailing above his body, trying to figure out where the blood is coming from. My hands come away coated in crimson and I scream for help, panicked.

I glance up seconds before the truck takes off down the street to see the shadowy outline of the truck's driver. I see part of his face. I look him in the eye. It's a fraction of a second but it feels like forever. Coward. Running, murderous coward.

The boy makes a soft sound, a faint cry of pain. I look down and try to figure out what I can do to help him. He's losing too much blood. The dark red liquid gathers beneath him on the hard road, tracking its way around the tiny imperfections in the pavement. It's like the gravel made an obstacle course and the warm, red streams compete with one another, each trying to win a race in a different direction. Blood leaks from his mouth and the side of his head, soaking his dark brown hair until it looks black. The metallic smell is overwhelming, and I gag.

I'm not a medical professional. I don't know what to do. I press my hands to the side of his head, but I can't figure out where the blood is coming from.

He stares at me, examines my features like I'm a puzzle he needs to solve. He is confused, stunned, and in complete shock. He's looking at me, but I'm not sure he sees me. My heart races so fast, the fluttering makes me dizzy. I'm too hot. I can't breathe. Everything tilts, but I can't look away. I don't want to lose contact with him, even though I know this

moment is where the vision ends, the instant life fades from his eyes. I can't leave him to die alone.

"Please, no. Stay with me." I give up on stopping the bleeding and grasp his face with both hands, leaving streaks of blood on his cheeks. I try not to move his neck as I lean down, my face above his, so close I can see the ring of gold around the center of his blue eyes. "Stay with me. Stay awake."

Any second now, I will wake up from this hallucination, this nightmare, and sob because he's gone. I don't know him. This isn't real. But this feels so sad. So wrong.

I hear it then, his shuddering breaths, the rattling in his lungs as they fill with blood. The light in his eyes—the awareness—fades, and I am shocked at the difference between life and death. Intensity and—emptiness.

"No!" The sound of my own voice, the rawness and desperation of it, startles me.

All of this is in my mind. The boy. The truck. The blood. It's all an illusion. This isn't supposed to be happening. Not anymore. Damn it, I take drugs for this.

Wake up. Wake. Up.

I cradle his limp body in my arms, beg my mind to release me from its prison as I sob. Air catches in my lungs as I rock back and forth and his blood soaks through my school uniform.

Why haven't I woken up yet? Without fail, I'm always snapped back to reality the moment the life leaves his eyes, and that's already happened. He's dead.

Please, I just want to go. *Let me go.*

I pull back, still holding him in a weak embrace. His head lulls back, almost hitting the asphalt. "Don't leave me." I lay his lifeless body on the ground as gently as possible but can't make myself let go. "You're not allowed to leave me."

A strange jolt of energy spreads inside me, something I've never felt before, unpredictable and wild, like cracks

advancing across a pristine piece of glass. My insides are as hot as a scorching sun in the desert.

Heat radiates from my gut to my hands, where they rest on his chest. I try to pull away, but it's as if my hands are melded to his body.

A flash of light blinds me. I slam my eyes closed, but the brilliant red-orange color chases me through the back of my eyelids. Searing pain shoots through my palms and climbs my forearms in long, narrow streaks, as if I'm being skinned alive. The flash of pain is like being struck by lightning. Instant and blinding, then gone as quickly as it appeared.

I'm breathing hard and fast, as if I just ran a sprint, but I haven't moved. I'm like a marble statue kneeling over the dead body.

Sirens blare in the distance. The cyclic, whirring horns drag my attention back to the present. The strange light show surrounding my hands flickers and goes out. I tear my gaze away from the boy and look up. Flashing lights on top of an ambulance come toward us, the sound louder with each passing second.

What the hell? I should be back to reality. None of this is supposed to happen. No sirens, no ambulance, no flashing light. My vision always ends when the boy takes his last breath.

I look down at him, expecting to see the lifeless eyes from my visions. Instead, he's looking up at me, blinking slowly, like he's as confused as I am. His eyes are ice blue, ringed with gold, and piercing, like he can see right into my soul. My heart skips a beat as he reaches for my hand where it still rests on his chest. His hand engulfs mine. I can't look away.

His lips part, about to speak, when out of nowhere, a paramedic nudges me out of the way, breaking the spell as he addresses the boy. "What is your name?"

The boy doesn't answer the paramedic and just stares at me. I stare back.

“Where do you hurt? Do you remember what happened?” The first paramedic rattles off questions to assess the boy’s alertness as a second prepares the gurney. The boy’s mouth opens and closes as he focuses on me, but he doesn’t make a sound.

The paramedic gives up and asks me instead, “Miss, what happened here?” The paramedic holds the boy down, hands locked onto his shoulders. “What’s his name? What happened? Do you know any of his medical history? Does he have any drug allergies?”

“I don’t know.” I don’t know *anything*. I don’t even know if this is real. “I was walking when he got hit. I don’t know who he is. I saw him get hit by a red truck, and it took off.” My voice shakes with adrenaline as I raise one blood covered hand and point in the direction the truck disappeared. “It went that way.”

“Stay put. The police will need to talk to you.”

“Okay.” I can’t stop looking at the boy. He’s alive. What is happening?

“Miss? I’m sorry. I’m going to have to ask you to move aside. We need to get him to the hospital. Now.”

I move away so they can tend to him. One of them checks his pulse while the other starts an IV. They are using medical vocabulary that means nothing to me as they place one of those horrible braces around his neck so he can’t move his head. They load him onto a stretcher and lift him into the ambulance. I try to follow them, but one paramedic places a firm hand on my shoulder as two police cruisers pull up next to us and park. I ignore them. I don’t want to be separated from *him*. I need to know what happens.

“Please, let me go with him. I need to know if he’s going to be okay.” My voice cracks. Why is this so important? I don’t even know him. This isn’t real. This can’t be real.

The paramedics exchange a look and the talkative one points to an officer headed my way. “You need to stay here and give your statement to the police.”

“Where are you taking him? What hospital?”

They tell me and I shudder. I know that place all too well. I spent three months on their psych floor a couple of years ago. Nodding, I back away as the police officer comes close enough that I see him in my peripheral vision.

I glance, one last time, at the stretcher in the ambulance. The boy is lying there, clothes soaked with blood, gaze locked on me, until they slam the doors shut and drive away.

The police officer clears his throat and I turn to face him. He’s tall and thin and looks like he’s my dad’s age. “Are you alright? Do you need medical attention before I take your statement? I can call another ambulance.”

I look down at my clothing and realize I am covered with blood. I shake my head. “It’s not mine. I’m fine.”

Except, I’m not. I’m shaking like a leaf, my legs feel like rubber, and I want my dad to come give me a hug and make the scary nightmare go away like he used to when I was five.

“What is your name?” He pulls out a notepad and a pen to take notes with.

“Dani Price.”

The officer asks more questions and I answer automatically. Tell him my address, phone number. He wants me to tell him everything I saw and asks for clarification every time I’m not specific enough.

Who is the boy? How long have I known him? What was he doing before the truck hit him? What direction was he going? What year was the truck? What make and model? What kind of red? Bright, cherry red or darker, burgundy? Normal tires or the big ones? I didn’t see the license plate, but he still asks me what color the plate was. Did I see the driver? How many people were in the vehicle? Was it from our state or from a different one? I have no idea.

I don’t know the answers to his questions. I should. I’ve seen this vision enough times that I should know every detail, but I don’t. I don’t know the answers to my own questions, either. Something’s wrong with me.

Why am I still here? Why isn't this bad dream over? Why was this time so different?

Am I going to wake up in a hospital bed somewhere?

Or is this *real*?

Is *he* real?

When I step into Dr. Patel's office two days later, the calming sky-blue walls and streams of natural light from the floor-to-ceiling windows are cheerful and instantly ease my anxiety. An array of fake plants, each one carefully placed to enhance the ambiance and serenity, line the walls. The building is newer. Instead of old wood, dust and mold invading my senses, like at school, I am surrounded by fresh paint and plastic. The plants, the carpeting, the waterproof coating on all the fabric, are all plastic. Artificial.

An illusion, except people make it like that by choice. All fake, like putting real frosting on a toy cake.

God, life is weird. Buildings are weird.

People are freaking weird. All of them. Which means maybe I fit right in. Maybe?

I can't help but notice the little fidget trinkets sitting on a tray on Dr. Patel's desk. She leans across her meticulously organized desktop and offers me one with a warm smile. I take a blue and orange spinner, rubbing the pads of my fingertips along the hard plastic edges as I sit across from her.

Dr. Patel just sits there, staring at me with a concerned expression. She knows I need time to gather my thoughts and build up the courage to speak. The silence stretches, the quiet whirring of my fidget toy the only sound I can hear above the pounding of the blood inside my head.

I break the silence with a trembling voice. "It happened again in the middle of class." My fingers fumble over the fidget toy. Whirl. Stop. Whirl. Stop.

Dr. Patel's expression softens with understanding. "One of your hallucinations?"

I nod, fear creeping in. "Yeah... it hasn't happened like that—while I'm awake—in over a year. And I think I had another one that same day, on the street."

Dr. Patel nods and makes a handwritten note in my file. Some days, I really want to read what is in that file. Most days I don't.

"Do you have your sketchbook with you?"

"Of course."

She holds out her hand across the desk. "Can you show me which one it is? Maybe there is a particular stressor or trigger that we could learn to avoid?"

I pull my sketchbook out of my bag and run my fingertips along the tattered edges. This thing has been through hell and back with me. As I open it to the page I'm looking for and hand it to her, I feel like I'm handing her a key to the darkest parts of me.

She looks at the image for a long time, especially considering she's seen it before. More than once. "I see." She closes the book and slides it back over to me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. Not really."

She nods, understanding I don't want to verbally relive my worst nightmares. "And how have you been feeling lately? Has your depression been getting worse?"

"Other than the hallucinations where I watch people die gruesome deaths over and over?" I shove the sketchbook into the depths of my bag and zip it up.

She grins, more than familiar with my number one defense mechanism—sarcasm. "Yes, other than that."

I tap the spinner on my thigh and look her in the eye. "I've been feeling pretty good. I'm doing well in my classes."

Dr. Patel nods and then asks, “What about your sleep? Are you having trouble sleeping?”

I hesitate, but I’m here for her help, so why lie? “I’ve been having nightmares again.”

Dr. Patel leans forward over her desk a bit and lays my file open. She takes a moment to look through the pages, her eyes scanning the words. “Are you still taking all of your medication?”

I nod. “Yeah, of course.” Out of all the medications I’ve tried throughout my life, Dr. Patel’s cocktail of drugs is the only one that works to minimize my visions without making me feel like a total zombie. That thing in movies where people stare into space drooling on themselves? Been there, done that. Do not recommend.

“I understand. Maybe lack of sleep is exacerbating your condition. I’m going to prescribe you a stronger sleeping pill for a couple of weeks. Let’s see if we can get things to calm down for you. Pick it up on your way home. Email me in a few days. Let me know how you feel. We can adjust the dose if necessary or try something else.”

She scribbles something on a piece of paper, handing it to me with a reassuring smile. I can’t read what’s written. The scrawls of ink and symbols make no sense to me. “Ok, thanks.” I tuck the prescription into my pocket and stand up to leave.

“Of course. Can we schedule a follow-up appointment in two weeks? I’d like to check in and see how you’re doing on the new medication.” She glances at her calendar, scanning for availability on that day. “How does four pm sound?”

I give her a tight-lipped smile. “Perfect.”

She walks me back to reception and reminds me, once again, to update her on how I’m feeling over the coming days. I take my time walking to the pharmacy, and then home, my mind spinning with questions as I pick at the blood under my fingernails. Am I the only one who can see it? Is it even there?

I shove my hands in my pockets until I get home and head straight to the shower. Two hours of homework, a dry piece of chicken and limp salad for dinner later, and I'm brushing my teeth for bed while patting my nosy dog's head.

Hermes, our rescued Greyhound racer, is adorable. It's not difficult to pet him when his head is literally bumping my hip. When I'm finished, I lean over and kiss the top of his head and rub his ears. "You're such a good boy, aren't you? You big softy."

His big brown eyes conquer my resistance and I squat down to give him extra attention.

I know what I'm doing. Avoidance is one of my specialties.

With a sigh, I stand up and reach for the bag I brought home from the pharmacy.

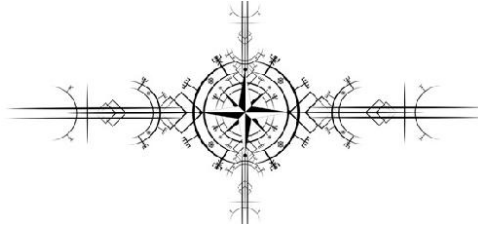
I tear open the paper bag and pull out the bottle. The label on the prescription makes me cringe. I've had this wonder-drug before.

I glare at myself in the mirror. Those dark circles aren't getting any lighter.

So... cute, dead boy bleeding all over me—over and over and over—or zombie-land for two weeks?

I take the pill.

TWO



I'm sitting on the cracked edge of a sparring mat, and the sticky cover is rough and scratchy under my legs. I watch as almost-dead mystery boy and his sparring partner, another teenage boy around the same age, move so smoothly it's like they're floating. Both make moves like martial arts masters would in a movie. The slap and thud of their bodies colliding makes me wince.

They are hitting hard, really hard, and not flinching. They aren't even struggling to breathe.

The smell of sweat and the sound of labored breathing fill the room as they advance and retreat. Punch. Block. They're both shirtless, their chest and back muscles flex and glisten with sweat. They are wearing some kind of workout pant, bare feet peeking at me from the bottoms of the black pant legs. They look too perfect to be real. I can't make out much of the rest of the room. A vague sense of a high ceiling and distant walls make me feel like I'm in a gymnasium or a cavern. The lights shine down from above and create the perfect glow around the two boys I'm watching, like spotlights on a stage.

No boy my age is that smoking hot, and that's how I know I'm dreaming. Two of them that look like they belong in a fitness magazine? Best dream ever.

I look down at myself and nod. Yes. Dream confirmed. I'm wearing my hot pink pajama shorts set and my feet are bare, the bright blue polish on my toenails exactly the way it looked when I crawled into bed. Dream? Totally. Do I want to wake up?

Returning my attention to the hot man festival, I grin. No. Sleep is good. So good.

What is wrong with me? Seriously. I know having a dream like this, drooling over someone who almost died, is wrong, but I find zero motivation to stop staring. It's just a dream. I can't help but admire the way he moves. Each kick, strike and counterstrike executed with precision and skill; his dark brows furrowed in concentration. The other one, the blond, is just as good, but he's the sideshow as far as I'm concerned. Mr. Hottie, dark hair and blue eyes, is the one who captures my complete attention. I can't look away. He launches an attack, and for the first time it seems like he might be out of control. The other boy grins, easily avoiding every wild movement.

Mr. Hottie doesn't give up. It's like he has a stockpile of frustration inside and he's letting it all out. His muscles ripple with every movement, and his breathing turns ragged. The smell of his cologne wafts towards me. It's a crisp, clean scent that contrasts with the musky smell of sweat.

My mysterious dream boy taunts his blond tormentor, his tone making it sound as if this blond boy is his friend. "Zel, you going to hit me or what?" The words roll off his tongue with a definite accent, one I've never heard before. Great. Now he's even more attractive. Is that some weird version of Scottish? What do Dutch people sound like? Maybe a bit Russian? I should have paid more attention in my linguistics class last year because I have no clue and I want to know. Badly.

Zel's smartass smile is gorgeous as he lands a roundhouse kick into my should-be-dead man's side. "If you actually fight back. What the hell, Ryker? You're boring today. A first year could kick your ass."

Ryker grunts in pain and slides away before Zel can hit him with a follow-up punch.

Ryker...so that's his name. Even though I know I'm dreaming it up, that name just seems to fit. Like it's the answer to a question I didn't know I was asking.

“Shut-up, Zelik. I’ve got a lot on my mind. I’m not in the mood.” Is that his name? For real? Where was that from? Same place as that insane accent?

“Mood doesn’t mean shit, you know that. I might leave you alone, *Your Royal Slowness*, if you weren’t moving like you were run over by a truck.” Zelik jumps and dodges, moving in circles around his dark-haired counterpart. “Come on, what’s up with you today? Hit. Me.”

He’s the opposite of Ryker in every way. He’s got golden blond hair just long enough to run his hands through. His brown eyes are kind and playful, a perfect contrast to Ryker’s piercing blue. He’s shorter, although not by much, but has a bulkier frame. Thicker shoulders.

“Your Royal Slowness?” Ryker’s grin promises retribution and my heart beats fast in anticipation. “Anyone else spoke to me that way, I’d grind them into dust.”

“Then do it.” Does this Zelik guy have a death wish?

Ryker walks over to the opposite side of the mat and picks a sword up off the ground. Zelik grins, doing the same, until they are facing off like gladiators. Those swords look sharp, and real, not fencing foils or those curved katanas. They look old-fashioned, medieval, like King Arthur’s knights would have used. My enjoyment of this dream slides into anxiety. Please, no. Don’t make me watch one of them die, sliced open and gutted like a fish. This was supposed to be a nice dream, a good dream for once. Please.

Ryker moves so fast I don’t see the motion. Suddenly he’s just there, in Zelik’s face, mere inches apart. The clash of the swords between their chests rings through the room, the grinding of metal worse than fingernails on a chalkboard as they slide apart. I shudder at the sound.

Ryker and Zelik move so quickly I can barely keep track. Strike, parry, slash, dodge, retreat, pivot, stab, lunge, feint, sweep, jump, block, advance. They are like machines programmed with every move and countermove. My fear that one of them is going to get hurt drifts away as they become

something not quite real. I've never seen anything like this, not even in the movies. They're evenly matched.

Out of breath, Zelik leaps away and holds his sword up, facing Ryker. The tension in the air is palpable—or maybe that's just me—as they circle each other, looking for an opening.

Zelik starts up a new conversation as he strikes. “Why did you get back at two in the morning last night?”

“Don't know what you're talking about.”

“Come on, Ry. You know they'll *kill* you if you get caught sneaking out again. And my father will kill *me* for not stopping you.”

“As if you could.” Ryker's smile is like a punch to my gut—it leaves me breathless.

“Don't make me hurt you. The queen will be upset if her baby boy bleeds.” Zelik takes a wild swing, ducking down to hit Ryker across his thighs.

Ryker drops his sword to block the move and shifts his feet farther apart to brace for the impact. “Nice try, asshole. I've lost enough blood recently.”

“What?” Zelik pulls away and takes two steps back. Apparently, the fight is over. Which is good and bad. I sigh in relief that neither one of them is bleeding to death. Now I can take my time and stare at their glistening...ummm.

Look away. Don't do it.

I fight for my life to force my gaze back to Ryker's face, but what I see there wipes the smile from mine. I've seen that look before, right before he got hit by a big red truck and died. I see resignation there, and a bit of fear. Apparently, Zelik sees it, too.

“Ryker? What the hell, man? What happened?” When Ryker doesn't respond, Zelik lifts his sword and acts like he's going to take a swing at his friend's head. Ryker holds his hand up, palm out, to hold him off.

“Okay. I, uh...there was an accident.”

Zelik freezes mid swing, eyes wide with helpless rage. I know, I've seen the same look on my father's face a hundred times. Zelik's jaw clenches. "What kind of accident?"

Ryker shoves the hilt of his blade into Zelik's gut hard enough to make him groan. "I don't remember much. And don't let your guard down."

Zelik scowls, but I can tell by the hand he locks onto Ryker's shoulder that he's not actually hurt. "Ry, seriously, what happened?"

"I was walking. A pickup truck came out of nowhere, and I didn't dodge fast enough."

"Didn't dodge fast enough? You? You said there was blood. Get to the part about the blood."

Ryker takes a wide swing, trying to sweep Zelik's legs and change the topic. Zelik quickly steps back, avoiding the hit, and returns it with one of his own. "Ry?"

Ryker answers him over the top of their crossed blades. "It was a freak accident. Just a few scratches."

"Bullshit, man. Why don't I see a single bruise on you?"

Ryker's movements get sloppy, his mind clearly not in the sparring arena anymore. "I didn't even realize what was happening. One minute I was fine, the next I was on the ground, bleeding out."

Zelik's entire being goes silent in a way I haven't yet seen from him. He is more than still. He is like a predator poised for the kill. His voice is quiet as well, matching this new mood. "So how are you here, sparring with me right now, and not dead in a hospital morgue in some random mortal city?" His voice dropped and increased in intensity with every word.

Mortal city? What does that mean? That they are not human? Aliens?

Vampires. Maybe my hot dream boyfriend is a vampire who can eat me alive. I'm not completely opposed to the idea. Sexy dream. Go, me.

This time it's Ryker who steps back. He raises his arm and runs his fingers through his hair. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

Ryker's blue eyes almost look like they are glowing in the dim light. "I mean, I don't know. One minute I was walking. Then the truck. Pain. Blood. Then nothing."

"I know you can heal better than the rest of us, but this sounds extreme, even for you."

"I'm serious, Zel. I don't remember what happened."

"Promise me you are done sneaking out at all hours. What the hell were you doing out there, anyway? And you can't keep borrowing Astavar's car."

"No. None of your business. And yes, I can." Ryker grins at what he obviously thinks is a very clever answer.

Boys. And who is Astavar?

Zelik takes advantage of Ryker's pause, kicking Ryker straight in the gut. My dreamy vampire boyfriend crumples over in pain, gasping for air.

And here I thought vampires didn't need to breathe.

"Don't let your guard down, Your Highness, lest a truck, named Zelik, run-eth you over."

I let out a chuckle. Ryker kind of deserved that.

Ryker's head pivots to look exactly where my dream-self is sitting, confusion clear on his face. His eyes search the surrounding area without a hint of fear. He looks suspicious, as if he's looking for something.

Or someone.

Did he just hear me laugh?

He lifts the tip of his sword and moves in my general direction. Taking the cue from his friend, Zelik joins him. Can those swords hurt me in here? I don't like to bleed in real life. Dreams aren't much better, but at least the blood disappears when I wake up.

Screw it. I'm not getting anywhere near those swords.

I scramble backward like I'm playing the crab-walker game in gym class.

I really hate that game.

"Ry? What's going on?"

"Shh. Someone is here."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know any other words? Your vocab is seriously limited today." Zelik breaks away from Ryker, moving to my left as Ryker comes forward to my right.

"Shut-up, Zelik."

"Yes, sir."

I breathe a sigh of relief when Ryker passes by. I scramble to my feet. When I find my footing, I straighten up to find Ryker standing inches away, his gaze locked on my position.

Shit. Can he see me? I am frozen.

"Anything?" Zelik's shouted question breaks my vampire boyfriend's magical hold over me and I want to step back.

Except I don't. He's just standing there, so close I can lean forward and I'll be right there against his chest. His cologne is stronger now, like wood and citrus and my favorite tea. Bergamot.

God, now I want to devour him, drink him up. Maybe I'm the vampire in this dream.

Instead, I stare into eyes that can't see me. They are inches away.

"I know you're here," his whispered words fan across my lips, and I hold my breath.

Should I answer him? I don't know what to do.

"Who are you?"

Nope. No way. Not answering the vampire, for obvious reasons. This has been an uncharacteristically delightful dream. I don't want to ruin it by turning this into a nightmare.

It's time to go. I've been in so many of these dreams that I know how to leave—when I'm calm. When I'm running from monsters or watching someone die, I am so not calm.

Still, I can't resist lingering. Weak. I'm weak.

I don't care. I rarely have a good dream. I'm taking advantage of it.

Moving slowly, I lift my hand and press my palm to his chest, just like I did on the street.

His skin is warm and I can feel the muscles moving just beneath the surface. I want to explore. *Bad, Dani. Bad.*

He lifts his hand as if he's going to cover mine.

No. Somehow, I know if he gets ahold of me, I won't be able to leave.

His eyes are even wilder now. Brighter. I want to stare at him, but I don't dare stay a moment longer. I close my eyes and shatter the dream the way my therapist taught me when I was seven. I pick up the imaginary hammer in my mind.

Swing the phantom hammer. Hard. Shatter the dream like glass.

The images of Ryker, Zelik, and the training room crack and fall away like slivers of a broken mirror tumbling to the floor. When I blink again, sunlight blinds me, and I have to squint against the light pouring through my bedroom window. The pastel ponies prancing across the thin curtains—I've had them since I was four, okay?—do nothing to hold the morning back.

My alarm is ringing. I grab my cell phone and swipe to shut it off. I need to get one of the old-fashioned tableside alarm clocks with the obnoxious bells. Nothing digital can break through my sleep coma, especially after I take my sleeping pills.

With a groan I feel all the way to my bones, I sit up and shove the seventy-five-pound heater, also known as our dog, Hermes, off my legs. I swing my feet over the edge of my twin bed. One glance at the stupid clock on my phone and I curse the world.

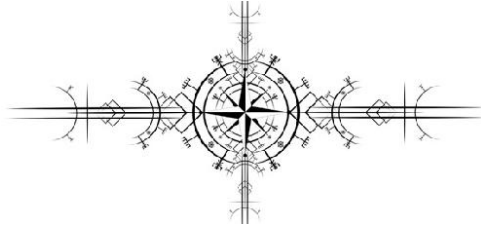
I'm late for school. Way late. And, as predicted when I took the pill last night, I feel detached and loopy. Zombie land, here I come. I'll be worthless in class today, but I still have to go. Stupid attendance policy is the only thing that can keep me from putting on that cap and gown and receiving my diploma. I've worked too hard and suffered too much to give up now. Hot dream boyfriend or not.

I try to distract myself with a shower, clothes, and my favorite playlist turned up way too loud. Nothing works.

A dream. That's all it was. I've had thousands of them.

So why can't I get those blue eyes out of my head?

THREE



I shove my textbooks into my backpack, and their sharp corners crunch and tear who knows what pieces of paper. Hope that wasn't important homework.

I brush my teeth as fast as humanly possible, then try not to choke on a piece of burned toast as I struggle to tie my shoelaces. The house is quiet—my parents must have already gone to work. Most mornings I leave before they get up, but my mom makes an effort to drag herself out of bed, bleary eyes and a critical case of bedhead included, in time to give me a hug goodbye. I guess she thought she missed me this morning.

The door slams shut behind me as I rush outside, still chewing on my impromptu breakfast. I don't have time to admire the crisp morning air or the budding trees as I head down the street at a jog. My backpack bounces up and down against my back, the textbooks making a dull thudding sound as they beat against one another. The soles of my feet dig into the pavement, propelling me forward, as my heart works to supply my muscles with oxygen. The pleasant burning sensation in my calves reminds me of how much I miss being on the cross-country team. I was forced to drop out mid-semester last year when I had a bad seeing-things-that-aren't-there flareup.

My breathing falls into a familiar rhythm, my legs pumping as I dodge people on the sidewalk. I keep going and going, not the least bit tired. The sky is cloudless and a perfect blue. The comfortable warmth of the morning sun sinks into

my skin. A powerful gust of wind pushes against me, but I don't let it slow my progress. A large black bird, almost the size of a hawk, takes advantage of the wind and soars high above me, keeping pace thanks to its large wingspan. I can see the freedom, the joy, that it has and would love nothing more than to join it in the air, to let my worries melt away and just... fly. What would it be like to live in a world where I am not afraid of being knocked off balance every second of every day? If I didn't have to worry about my parents, missing too much school, or trying to decide if everything I was seeing at any given moment was real... or not real?

I shake my head, bringing myself back to my surroundings. These thoughts aren't productive. They only make me long for a life that's not mine. I learned a long time ago that lingering on impossibilities is a vicious cycle of 'what ifs'. That negative feedback loop always leads to disappointment. Right now, the only thing I have to do is make it to school, preferably before third period starts. I pick up the pace.

I round the corner and see the familiar sight of school buildings looming in front of me. Almost there. I dodge Isabella and Madison—the queen B of the school and her mini-me—leaving the school grounds, ditching class to partake in questionable activities. The crosswalk isn't all that wide and I hear them chatting under their breath to one another. I mutter a quick apology to them, but don't stop running as they scurry past me.

I hear the word "*freak*" and look back over my shoulder to see the two girls laughing and gesturing toward me. My face flushes, and I try to tell myself that they didn't mean anything by it. But, of course, they absolutely did. Isabella's hated me since freshman year when I disagreed with her in English class by stating that Juliet was an idiot for stabbing herself.

Fall so madly in love with a boy that I can't live without him? No freaking way.

I enter the main building and am assaulted by the bang of lockers slamming shut, the smell of suntan lotion, cheap perfume, and various other scents masked by deodorant. It

must be a passing period. A group of cheerleaders, their hair bouncing and makeup perfect, zip past me, followed closely by a group of football players, and they all stare at me as I jog past.

No one at school is supposed to know about my medical history. It's private. Which means everybody thinks they know everything. They make up stories that are even worse than reality, especially with the unreal amount of superstition, and the fact that Salem—the place where they literally burned supposed witches—is only a few hours away. I've been called a demon and a witch. When I was twelve, one psychologist asked me if I wanted to be a serial killer when I grew up.

Really?

My mom fired him the next day.

He was gone, but all these questions and mean words stick to me like they're thumbtacks and I'm the corkboard.

Last year Isabella asked for my 'body count' in the middle of chemistry class. I thought she meant the number of boyfriends I'd hooked up with—a big fat zero. No. She meant dead bodies, as in people I'd killed. Everyone within hearing distance laughed. Assholes.

The best I can do to survive the hell-scape that is high school is ignore the stares from the people who don't bother to try to understand me.

I spot Ava rummaging around in her locker and run over to her, the soles of my shoes squeaking against the linoleum floor. I touch her shoulder to get her attention. She jumps and turns around, startled. "Oh my god, Dani! Where have you been?" Her voice cracks with a mixture of surprise and relief.

"I overslept. A lot. Woke up an hour late." I can see her assessing my appearance, eyes lingering on my unkempt hair, which, now that I think about it, I forgot to brush. I glimpse myself in the reflection of the school windows and grimace. Yikes. Hair going every direction and eyes puffy from sleep. I definitely could have used an extra ten minutes this morning to make myself look halfway decent.

She unzips the small pocket on the front of her bright pink backpack, looking for something. Eventually, she unearths a comb and offers it to me with a pointed look toward my bedhead. “Here.”

“My hero.” I gratefully take the comb and feel the roughness of the plastic handle as I try to tame the wild mess on my head. Poor Ava proclaimed herself my best friend in kindergarten. We’ve stuck together like gorilla glue since we met.

“You got that right.” Ava reaches out and pulls a loose hair off my shirt. Make that at least a dozen lost. Sometimes, hair is so gross. “So how was the wise, the compassionate, the all-powerful Dr. P?”

“Oh, yeah, she’s doing well. Thanks for asking.” I lay the sarcasm on thick. “Her kids are thriving at their new school! We didn’t talk much about her husband though...I get the feeling there are some marital problems at home.”

Ava rolls her eyes and gives me a little shove while giggling. “Come on, you know what I meant.”

I did, but I really hoped she’d just drop it. Damn, Ava’s too persistent. I suppose that’s why she’s my friend. “It went alright...She gave me another sleeping pill to help me make it through the night without waking up a dozen times. I guess it worked a little too well.”

It did not, however, prevent me from having lifelike dreams about my mysterious alien-vampire boyfriend. Or maybe he’s a werewolf? That could be cool. Although, I have always wanted to be a mermaid, so if he could magically make me breathe underwater, I wouldn’t turn him down.

Ava purses her lips. “How long do you have to be on them this time?”

“Two weeks, at least.” I sigh and hand the comb back to her. Desperate to change the subject, I bring up the one thing she’s been looking forward to since freshman year. “So, have you asked Nicole to prom yet?”

Ava lets out a little squeak as she slams her locker shut. “Dani! Shh!” Her eyes dart around as she glances around the busy hallway; it’s critical that no one is paying attention to us. The sound of chatter, lockers slamming shut, and footsteps fill the air. I glance around. Not one self-absorbed teen is even looking in our direction.

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. Ava and Nicole have been flirting with each other for years now. However, in true high school angsty fashion, Ava is convinced no one noticed her crush. To her, it’s some big secret. I tried to tell her more than once—at least half the school knows they’re basically a thing.

“You should go for it. You know she’s too shy to make the first move.” I can see it now: Ava, the spunky art nerd, and Nicole, the band geek, stumbling around the dance floor and stepping on each other’s toes. A match made in heaven.

“I know. I was gonna ask her after school. That way, if she says no, I have a solid overnight to recover my dignity before I have to see her again!” Ava wrings her hands with nervous energy.

“Fine. But you can’t back out this time. Prom’s in a week!” She claimed she was going to ask Nicole to prom last week. And the week before that. And the one before that.

“I know, I get it.” Ava waves her hand toward me dismissively. “But what about you? Have you thought about who you want to go with?”

My mind drifts to ice-blue eyes rimmed with gold, and the smell of wood and citrus. Of his breath teasing the air across my lips. I raise my fingers to my mouth subconsciously.

“Oh. My. God! There *is* somebody! Why didn’t you tell me? Who is it?” Ava’s words fly out of her mouth so fast I have a hard time understanding her. She’s hopping up and down like a madwoman.

I regret my lack of control when it comes to my facial expressions. How am I supposed to explain that I’ve got it bad for someone who—most likely—doesn’t even exist? “No, there’s no one!”

“Nope. You’re not getting away with this. You have to tell me—” Her sentence gets cut off by the shrill ring of the school bell, signaling the beginning of the next period.

“Sorry Ava, gotta run! Don’t want more tardies.” I use the opportunity to slip away, walking down the hall toward my third period classroom.

“I’m not letting this go!” She shouts down the hall in my direction. I grimace, knowing she won’t give up on it. I need to come up with an explanation for my love-induced haze that isn’t ‘I want to go to prom with my imaginary boyfriend’.

Luckily, I don’t have a class with Ava for the rest of the day, so I can take my time brainstorming a plausible story.

The halls are empty save for four other students. Preoccupied, like I was? Or did they overestimate how long the passing periods are? By the time I make it to class, the teacher has already started his lecture on ancient Chinese dynasties.

I pull the chair out from under the desk. The metal legs make a horrible screeching sound as they scrape across the floor. The other students in the class turn their heads toward me, their eyes burning holes into my skin. So much for not bringing attention to myself. Luckily, my world history teacher, Mr. Hudson, doesn’t get off on publicly shaming students who are late to his class, and just continues his lecture.

I spend five minutes trying to pay attention before I give up. Now that I’m not late to school, running down the sidewalk, my brain has time to ruminate on other topics. Like my hallucination—the boy being hit by the truck—that may or may not have come true. Either way, it’s bad news for me. But if that was bad, what about the lifelike dream where I watched hot guys working out all night? With swords. Like medieval knights, or a hero from one of my favorite fantasy novels.

Why can’t I dream about normal boys? God, I must be horny, or desperate. Or both. Probably both. Prom. Graduation. College. Everything was happening so fast. I

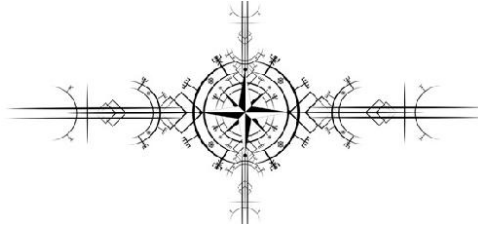
don't know anything about what my life is going to be like after I walk across the stage and receive my diploma.

I am supposed to know what I want to do with my life?! What a joke.

I stare out the window into the school courtyard, questioning my sanity. A large black bird lands on the windowsill—a raven. It hops back and forth, looking inside through the classroom window with prying eyes. Its jet-black feathers reflect hues of iridescent purple and green in the morning sunlight.

It looks in my direction and freezes. I swear that bird is staring right at me. But that would be nuts, right?

FOUR



Bless you, Mr. Hudson, for spending all of history class doing a review. I don't have the energy to focus on learning anything new. The large, black bird that just slow-blinked while staring straight at me? I can't stop focusing on him. Or her? No idea. I don't know how to react to its apparent interest in me. Forget that, I'm not sure it's really there.

I can just see them all now, Dr. P, my parents, even Ava, shaking their heads. Poor Dani, the girl who hallucinates grisly death scenes, is now convinced a wild bird sits outside her classroom window, specifically to watch her.

Of course, the bird is watching me. Or it's not.

But what the hell? I'm going to run with it. Yes. That totally fits my mood. An imaginary raven—because I am convinced no one else would see the damn thing if I pointed it out—following me, watching me, looking me in the eye like it wants to say something, makes perfect sense.

I wave, then put my head down on my desk so I can watch it without getting a crick in my neck. It's a pretty bird. But maybe I should get my brain under control before things get worse. If I don't? Who knows? Maybe the bird will talk to me next. That would be a new one.

The large bird takes off, wings flapping with elegant power. I stare out the window until it becomes a tiny dot in the blue sky. I wish I could fly away like that.

Sad that my short-lived, bird-provided entertainment is over, I spend the rest of class zoned out, arguing with myself

over what is real and what isn't.

School? Real. Parents? Real, verified by Ava, my real friend, whose existence has been cross-verified by my parents.

The fact I even think worry about this stuff is depressing.

Boy who died after being hit by a truck, but then didn't die after being hit by the same truck? Real? Not real? I can't decide, and that scares the shit out of me.

Thankfully, Mr. Hudson is also a teacher who doesn't spontaneously call on students. If he asks me a question about the Tang dynasty, I will embarrass myself in front of everybody. I already do a great job without extra help. I don't need a teacher pitching in to humiliate me.

The rest of the school day drags, moving slower than a snail whose slime froze on ice. Invertebrate biology is probably not the chapter to be reading when I'm in this mood. I spend all of physics thinking about the shape of a bird's wing, and how far that boy's body flew when the truck smashed into him.

I can't tell anyone what I've been doing—which is trying to solve the mystery of real or not real when it comes to the boy. If I am so convinced it was real, then why, despite several phone calls to the hospital, does no one seem to know anything about a bleeding teenage boy, victim of a hit and run? No record. No one admitted to the hospital with that description. Nothing. It's like he doesn't exist.

Which scares me even more.

I spot the raven during passing periods, just hanging in the trees and chilling in the courtyard. Maybe it's looking for some berries or a beetle to feed on? I make a game for myself, seeing how many times I can spot it throughout the day. I end up counting to nine. Does it have a nest around here?

The moment the last bell of the day rings, I am out of my seat. My teacher doesn't finish her last sentence before I beeline for the door. I can't stand sitting here for another minute. I'm down the hall and out the door before most students even finish packing their bags.

Ava is waiting for me, nose buried in her phone, by the school steps. “Hey!” I call out to her as I approach. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah, definitely. Just give me a minute.” Ava pulls out her sparkle-filled bubble gum lip gloss and applies a thin coat, using her cell phone camera as a mirror.

I raise one of my eyebrows and can’t stop the smile spreading across my entire face. “What could you possibly need that for? We’re going home. Gonna smooch yourself in the mirror or something?”

I know exactly what my BFF is doing—or hoping to do.

Ava scoffs. “No, I’m just trying to be prepared.” She twists the cap back on the lip gloss and puts it away, puckering her lips at her phone. “What if we run into Nicole on the way home? I need to look good.”

“That has never happened before. She lives on the other side of town.”

“Better safe than sorry.” Ava checks her earrings, slides the clasp of her necklace to the back and unfastens the top button of her school uniform’s ultra conservative, white blouse.

I roll my eyes and chuckle, pulling her toward the stairs as she’s admiring her reflection. “Yes, yes. We know you’re hot. Time to go.”

“Fine.” Ava puts her phone in her backpack and starts walking with me. We make it about a block from school before she speaks up again. “Speaking of Nicole...who’s got you all hot and bothered?”

Damn, I really hoped she would forget about that. “I met him on the way to Dr. Patel’s yesterday.” The best lies are based on the truth. “He was lost and needed someone to point him in the right direction.”

“And?”

“And, he was, by far, the most attractive human being I’ve ever seen.”

Ava squeals and claps her hands in excitement. “Oh my goodness! What’s his name?”

Ryker. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Did you get his number at least?”

“Uh...no.”

Ava lets out a frustrated sigh and cuts in front of me, stopping me in my tracks. “So you mean to tell me you met the man of your dreams, and just let him go? Did you even smile at him, or flirt, or anything?” Her eyes are wide in disbelief.

“Hey, in my defense, I had other things on my mind.” Lots of other things, like worrying about a truck running him over. “But yes, that is exactly what happened.” I push past her and start walking again. After a moment, she trots to catch up.

Ava launches into a lecture I’ve heard a million times by now. It’s filled with ‘you have to put yourself out there’ and ‘give someone a chance to see how awesome you are’ and ‘I don’t want to see you die a lonely old cat lady’. I know she means well, but after a certain point, I tune her out. I can die a lonely old cat lady if I want to, thank you very much. Cats are adorable.

I don’t notice she stops talking until she pulls on my sleeve, pointing behind us. I turn to look, and my heart skips a beat. A raven is standing on the sidewalk. It hops toward us, wings shining as it holds them partially extended to its sides, like it wants to wave them at us. Weird.

“Oh my god, Dani! Is that bird following us? It’s huge!” Her eyes are filled with excitement and wonder. “I’ve never been this close to a bird this big before.”

“It’s a raven.” Is that the same raven I’ve been seeing all day? Thank god, because if Ava sees it, too, I’m not adding it to my things-that-are-not-real tally. But if the raven is real, why would it be following us? Because she’s not wrong. The bird hops closer and closer, until it is only a couple steps away, and stares straight at us.

“Should we give it something? Maybe it’s hungry.” Ava crouches to the ground, beckoning the raven closer as she digs in her backpack for the crumbly remains of her latest snack. “Got it.” She removes a small bag of smashed crackers, pulls one out, and extends her hand.

The raven seems uninterested and gives her a blank stare—but it doesn’t fly off either. Is something wrong with it? Is it hurt? Does it have babies stuck in a drain and it’s asking humans for help, like in one of those videos? Or maybe it has a brain fungus controlling its every move like those disgusting moths I learned about last year.

“Ava, you know we’re not supposed to feed wild birds. It’s bad for them.” I reach for her elbow, pulling her up so she’s no longer practically sitting on the ground. “Come on, we should keep going.”

Ava stands up, tugging against my hold, reluctant to leave the bird. She knows me. I’m not going to budge on not feeding that bird. She gives in and waves with childlike energy. “Bye-bye, Mr. Raven!”

I don’t bother telling her it doesn’t understand what a wave means. She knows.

We continue walking, checking behind us every few minutes. Sure enough, the raven is still hopping along behind us. Eventually, we reach the intersection where Ava and I go our separate ways. She gives me a hug and tells me to keep her updated and reach out if I need anything. As she walks away, she turns to see if the raven is following her.

It’s not. The raven is staring up at me, waiting for me to continue walking. Why is it following me? I’m not its mother.

I wave to Ava one last time as she turns a corner and disappears.

I make a little shooing motion. “Go on! Go find your friends. Stop following me.” The raven croaks and hops to the left three times. It looks to me expectantly and hops again, in the same direction. Stops. Stares at me. Flaps its wings as if it’s annoyed with me, the stupid human, and hops once toward

me before squawking. The caw sound is loud, insistent, and ugly.

“You should learn some songs or something.”

It makes the same noise, hops toward me, then away. Looks me in the eye like it’s waiting on me.

This is so freaking weird—but what else is new? Everything in my life feels weird.

“You want me to follow you?” Now I know I’m losing it, talking to a dang bird.

The raven croaks in response, almost as if it is confirming that it does, indeed, want to be followed. Which also means the bird understands what I’m saying. Right?

Okay, no, this is too far out there, even for me.

Turning toward home, I take two more steps before the raven lands right in front of me, blocking my path. It squawks at me again, flapping its wings in a temper tantrum. It’s even louder this time.

I take a step in the raven’s direction, and it bobs its head in excitement, as if trying to encourage me to go along. It half flies, half hops across the street—the opposite direction from my house—and looks back at me.

Okay. Now this bird is acting really bizarre. Just to test things out, I take another step toward my house. The insane bird noisily flaps its way back in front of me, wings spread to its sides as wide open as the baffling bird can get them. It’s not small. The black wings nearly block the entire width of the sidewalk. It looks me in the eye and squawks again.

What the hell? If Ava hadn’t seen him—or her—too, I would think this was another hallucination. But she saw the bird. We both did. It has to be real. Right?

The raven takes three hops into the street, stops, turns around to look at me, and waits.

I weigh the options in my head. What’s the worst that can happen? If I walk across the street and the bird flies away? No one will know I was silly enough to follow a raven. And if the

raven wants me to follow it? Maybe it really does have hurt babies on the ground or needs my help with something. I've seen all those videos online lately of birds, and other wildlife, asking people for help. So, I can either follow the bird and potentially save a nest full of babies, or go home and ruminate, stressed and depressed, over my mental health?

I'll take the baby birds, thanks.

Following Mr. Raven across the street and down the block, I stop occasionally to see if it will notice that I'm no longer following. Every time, the bird croaks in annoyance, telling me to get my ass in gear. Apparently, we have somewhere to be.

Bossy and annoying. Is this raven the principal's spirit animal or what?

A few blocks later, we reach a park that is coming back to life after a long, brutal, northeast winter. The grass is green in patches and the flowers in the garden are starting to bud. When I was really young, my parents would bring me here almost every weekend during the summer.

The raven leads me toward a patch of giant red oak trees and flies up into one. At which point the bird lands on a low-hanging branch, sits there and stares at me as if this is the end of the road. Most of the tree's limbs are bright and green with new spring leaves. The branch Mr. Raven lands on is dead and turning black. The dark, spindly bits stemming from the main branch are twisty and desolate, like my mood.

"Hey, asshole! Where are your babies?" I narrow my eyes at the bird in annoyance. "I can't fly, you know? And I hate climbing trees."

The raven glances at me, croaks, and leaps off the branch he was perched on. It flies away and I lose track of it when it disappears through the clouds.

"Oh great. Thanks for nothing, you dumb bird."

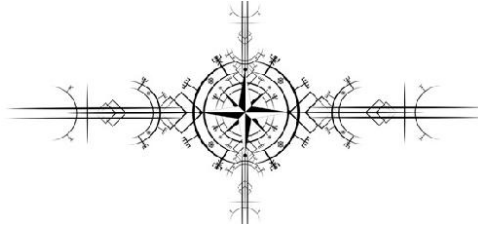
"So you save random strangers' lives and talk to birds?" A smooth, deep voice with a peculiar accent surrounds me. "Do they answer?"

I look around, confused, until a boy with dark brown hair and ice-blue eyes steps out from behind a hemlock tree that's just a few steps past the oak.

My heart stops in my chest, and I forget to breathe.

Ryker.

FIVE



Ryker? How did he get here? And why is he hiding behind trees in the park?

I am so stunned I forget to speak. My mouth hangs just enough for my lips to part, and my eyes widen in shock. My vampire boyfriend—who may or may not be a figment of my imagination—is standing right in front of me, and he looks good.

My pulse races as I take in the sight of him. He wears a pair of well-worn jeans that hug his legs in all the right places. His black sweater looks thick and expensive. The heavy weave emphasizes his shoulders. The sleeves are pushed up to reveal most of his forearms, which have more than enough muscles on display to make me stare. Shit, he's built, and taller than I remember. Eventually, my thoughts catch up to the fact that he asked a question.

So, he heard me ranting at a bird. Great. At least when he asked me if they talk back, he was joking. I think. "Not today."

He notices me checking him out, and gives me a lopsided, knowing grin that makes my insides melt. "Well, I'm glad I ran into you. I wanted to thank you for saving my life yesterday." He leans his shoulder against the trunk of the oak tree.

My cheeks flush and I know I'm turning as pink as Ava's backpack. Real or not, he is one fine specimen. That grin of his should be registered as a lethal weapon.

“I didn’t do anything, but you’re welcome.” I give myself a mental high-five for stringing together a cohesive sentence, even though my voice is barely above a whisper, the taste of my nerves bitter as orange rinds on my tongue.

“Of course you didn’t.” He speaks softly but his gaze is scorching.

Why is he looking at me like I’m a puzzle he’s trying to solve? “Are you okay?”

“Of course I am” He takes a few slow steps in my direction. He’s only a few feet away now, in the shade of the tree. He should walk into the sun, right? Then I can figure out if he sparkles. Or spontaneously bursts into flame.

Ha ha, funny, not funny, Dani.

“What is your name, by the way?” He moves even closer, and I feel like my feet are stuck in hardened concrete. “I’d like to know the name of my savior.”

My heart beats so hard I’m afraid it’s going to leap out of my chest. “Dani.”

“Dani...” He tries my name out on his tongue, hanging onto every letter, eyes locked on mine. He doesn’t look away once. “Is that short for something? Danielle? Or Danica?” The sound of my name on his lips makes my pulse jump and all the sudden it’s like I have a kangaroo hopping around, kicking the insides of my ribcage.

I can breathe. Right? He’s not that hot.

Who am I kidding? Yes, he is. He so is.

“Danielle, but I won’t answer to it. And what’s yours?” I’d like to know the name of the guy I ‘saved’ and dreamed about this morning. I *need* to know his name.

“Ryker. My name’s Ryker. Friends call me Ry.”

My breath leaves my body. He just confirmed that I was right. I already knew the answer. I dreamed about him—and the name I imagined is actually his.

My hands tremble slightly as I respond. “Nice to officially meet you, Ryker. I’m glad you’re not dead.” Smooth, Dani. Smooth.

He chuckles in response. God, his laugh is gorgeous. “Me too, Dani.” He runs his fingers through his dark hair before continuing. “Nice uniform. What school? West?”

I’d be creeped out by the fact that he knew which high school I attend if West wasn’t one of the only schools around that require a uniform. And, also, one of the only schools around. “Yeah, for a couple more weeks.”

“Senior then?”

I nod.

“Me, too.” He pauses, as if expecting me to ask which school he attends, but I have an idea already—Forsetta Academy. There is only one school around for rich, beautiful people like him. Part of me doesn’t want to know. I’m not sure how much more I should indulge this fantasy of mine.

“Well, if there’s anything I can do to repay you, just say the word.”

“Oh no, there’s really no need to—”

“I insist. You saved my life.” He looks at me, his feet shifting like he’s nervous. “Taking you out to dinner is the least I can do.”

Dinner?

Is this gorgeous, imaginary boy asking me on a date? Like a proper date? With a dress? And dinner? And a kiss at the door, date?

As tempting as a date with the hottest guy I’ve ever seen is, there’s still a very high probability that he is a figment of my imagination. I’d rather not be stood up by a ghost. Or worse, believe he’s there and have the waiter think I’m talking to thin air. There’s a name for that, too. I’m sure Dr. Patel could rattle off a dozen names for the mental circus going on with me right now.

“No, no. I couldn’t—”

“Coffee then?”

I shake my head.

He pauses and frowns, the edges of his lips turning down. His shoulders slump, just a bit, and I wonder if I hurt his feelings, which makes the kangaroo jumping around in my chest drop into my gut, like a sucker punch.

Why do I care? If he’s real, which maybe he could be, he’s gorgeous and rich and way out of my league. He probably has a new girlfriend every week. I doubt I’m capable of affecting him at all. But what if that glimmer of disappointment I see in his eyes is real?

Shit. I do care. A lot.

He sighs and turns his head so all I get is his profile—which is still freaking gorgeous. “All right. But, seriously, if there’s anything you need, I would like to help. Is there really nothing?”

“I don’t think so...” The beginnings of a plan forms in my mind. It’s absurd. Really out there. But I’m desperate. And if it doesn’t work? Well, no one will be the wiser. Kind of like me following a raven to a park where I am talking to my imaginary crush. “Well...actually...there might be something.”

His head snaps back around and his eyes light up like he’s a kid on Christmas morning. As if doing something for me is incredibly important to him.

Score one point in the ‘W’ column for this being not real.

“Yes, anything.”

Did he just say anything? Nice fantasy. One more point, same column. But what the hell? I take a deep breath and blurt out the idea before I think better of it. “Meet me this Saturday night, at seven-thirty, in front of my high school. Wear a suit.”

“You got it. May I ask what we will be doing?”

I thought it would be obvious. My imaginary crush should be able to read my mind, right? Especially if he’s a vampire. “Prom. You’re taking me to prom.”

“Prom? Okay. Saturday.” He winks and gives me a heart-stopping grin that melts my insides. “Great. I will see you then. Looking forward to it.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you at the bottom of the steps.” This way, if he’s not real, I’ll know for sure because none of my classmates, including Ava, will see him. And if he is real, I won’t be murdered by a guy I just met, because we’ll be in a crowd. Added bonus for the real column? I’ll have a smoking hot prom date.

“See you...” I wave at him as he saunters away. I walk back the direction I came, making an enormous effort not to sneak a peek behind me. My willpower fails and I glance over my shoulder, disappointed to see he’s already gone. Or maybe he was never there.

I continue walking, legs weak and hands shaking. I inhale, hold, exhale through my lips while counting down from ten, trying to calm my racing heart. If Ryker isn’t real, my condition is worse than ever. It would mean my visions are bleeding into reality, making it impossible to tell what is real and what isn’t. If that’s the case, I will need somebody constantly confirming that who I’m talking to, what I’m seeing, what I’m experiencing and feeling, is legitimate. I could never trust myself—or my senses—even for a moment.

The thought makes me sick to my stomach. If I just invited someone who doesn’t even exist to prom, I think I might lock myself away in my house, permanently.

I clasp my shaking hands together and take another deep breath, looking around for something to ground myself in my surroundings. I hear the birds chirping in conversation with one another, and a breeze carries the scent of blooming cherry blossoms as it plays with my hair. I run my sweaty palms over my skirt, and the soft texture soothes my nerves.

Panic isn’t productive. All I can do is put one foot in front of the other and focus on one thing at a time. I roll my stiff neck back and forth, massaging it with my hands, and try to relax my shoulders. Apparently, I have a date to prom. With

Ryker. I try to hold back the smile building up inside me, but it refuses to stay down.

I make sure I'm at least a block away from the park before calling Ava. She answers after the first ring. "Dani, what's up?"

"Ava, we need to go dress shopping."

"What about this one?" Ava calls to me from across the rows of dresses. I think she might be holding up a dress, but she's too short for me to see it over the rack.

It's been three days since my run-in with Ryker at the park. As luck would have it, I have had no full-body hallucinations, potential breaks in reality, or lifelike dreams since. My life has been blissfully peaceful, aside from the fact that I've been worrying about whether or not I have a real date to the prom. Obsessing, really, every waking moment.

Ava finally asked Nicole to prom earlier today. She said yes, of course. Ava was so nervous she fumbled over all her words and was thoroughly mortified. I'm pretty sure Nicole thought it was adorable. Who wouldn't?

I walk around the rows of dresses that separate Ava and me to get a better look at her choice. It is beautiful, and somehow, its soft pink color complements Ava's dark hair and olive skin. Swirls of dark pink run along the neckline and continue down the length of the dress. The sheer overlay is beautifully sparkly. It's spunky and has a lot of personality—just like Ava. It's perfect.

"What do you think?" Her voice is filled with excitement.

"I love it." I smile. "You should try it on."

She beams at me and after a quick trip to the dressing room, she emerges in the gown. She looks radiant. She twirls

for me, showing it off. The skirt poofs up as it flows through the air, and the sparkles grab light in an eye-catching way. Ava strikes a supermodel pose, one hand on her hips and the other behind her head, and winks at me, laughing. “So? How do I look?”

I can’t help but laugh. Her joy is contagious. “I think this is a winner, Ava.” I smile at her and wiggle my eyebrows. “Nicole won’t be able to keep her hands off you.”

Ava’s eyes light up with mischief, clearly enjoying that thought. “I think so, too.” She turns to look in the mirror, admiring herself and the dress for a while, before looking back at me. “Now, we just need to find you something to wear! Even though you won’t tell me who you asked, I still want you to knock their socks off.”

“Ava, I told you already. He’s from a different school. You wouldn’t know him. He’ll probably realize he doesn’t want to go to prom with a girl he barely knows and stand me up.” I can’t tell her the truth for obvious reasons.

“Uh huh.” She looks at me incredulously, not buying it. “I’m gonna go change back into my clothes. You keep looking.”

I wander back over to the rows of gowns, but their selection is slim. We are shopping last minute, and the store already sold most of their inventory. I manage to find a few contenders that are promising in my size. Each of them is gorgeous in its own, elegantly simple way. I call Ava over and she looks over each of my selections, nodding in approval.

Ava plops down on the couch outside the fitting room, already scrolling through her socials, as I go to try the first dress on. I strip, fold my clothes, and place them on the fitting room bench. I slip the first gown on, an emerald green, off-the-shoulder beauty, over my head. I stretch to zip up the back, but the zipper gets stuck halfway up. It doesn’t fit. I frown, disappointed. The bodice is too tight, and, now that I’m examining the fit closer, the skirt does not lay right against my curves. I sigh heavily and crack open the changing room door

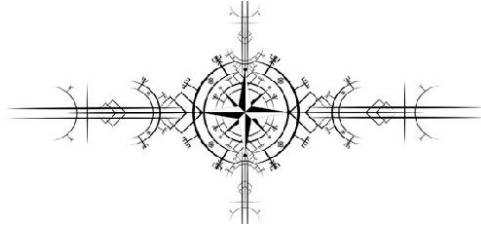
just enough to poke my face out. “Ava, can you come back here, please?”

I hear her jump up from the couch without hesitation. “What’s the matter?” Her shoes don’t make a sound on the carpet as she approaches me. “It doesn’t fit?”

“No, not quite. I think it’s too tight in the bodice. The zipper is stuck.”

“Here, let me see.” I step out into the open, using my hands to gesture up and down my body for emphasis. Ava turns me around to face the mirror and stands behind me to look over my shoulder. “Holy shit. Have you been working out? Since when are you so ripped?”

SIX



Ava's awed voice catches me off guard. She's looking at me as if she's never seen me before. I stand in front of the mirror, checking myself out. I do look a little different. Scratch that, I look a *lot* different. How did I not notice before?

"Dani? Whatever magic potion you're drinking, I want some." Ava sounds like she's almost jealous. Of *me*? Weird.

"Um, I don't know. I mean, it's warm enough that I can run outside again. I always loved running." I don't tell her that other than my mad dash to school the other morning, I haven't been running this season. Not yet.

It's as if every muscle group in my body belongs to an Olympic athlete. My arms are toned to perfection, and I can see my abs through the thin, tight fabric of the bodice. I turn to the left, inspecting myself further. My back looks formed, more muscular, and my shoulders are slender but defined. I hike the skirt up my legs and see that my thighs are tight and smooth. My calves look like they're sculpted marble. I bite my lip. I look amazing. Did one frantic run to school—yes, it was more than a few blocks—snap my body back into peak form? One run? I mean, awesome, but wow.

"I went running, and they made me play soccer in gym last semester, but I didn't think the changes would be this drastic." My gaze locks with Ava's in the full-length mirror. "Is this normal? Maybe I have some kind of muscle disease?"

"No. That's just dumb. No." She looks me over, shaking her head. "Doesn't look like there's anything wrong with you

to me. You look amazing.”

I’m tempted to search it up online, but after years of looking up my diverse array of symptoms, I know the internet is going to say I have cancer. Or a brain tumor. Or internal bleeding. Or something similarly awful that is going to kill me in a week or less. “I can’t believe it. I’ve never gotten back in shape after one run. It usually takes a lot more.” Like months, to look like this.

“Uh...I don’t know. Maybe one of your meds is messing with you? You know, speeding up your metabolism or something?”

Of course, Ava’s response is far more logical than mine. It would make sense if my meds were causing fat loss. Half the time I forget to eat, anyway. Add the new sleeping meds, and I have to set timers on the weekends, or I don’t eat at all. The school gym bros would be so jealous if they knew the secret to being ripped is to be heavily medicated and have visions of people dying.

Oh, and unable to sleep.

“Whatever it is, I think I’m gonna need a bigger size.”

“On it.” Ava takes a quick look at my selections and leaves the fitting room to go grab the same dresses in a larger size. After a moment, Ava returns carrying a collection of gowns on her arms in different colors and sizes. “I couldn’t find all the dresses you picked out in a larger size, but I picked out a few that I thought you might like.”

“Thanks, Ava.” I grab the gowns and hang them up on the hooks in the dressing room. “I’ll try these on and come show you if I like any of them.”

“Of course. I’ll be waiting.” Ava turns around and walks away, returning to the couch outside of the dressing room.

I hang the new contenders on the wall hooks and slip out of the too-tight emerald green failure. I put it back on its hanger—yes, I’m one of those kinds of shoppers, hate to leave a mess—and pause, mid-movement, when I catch a glimpse of my nearly naked body in the mirror.

I'm in a pair of pink bikini panties and a nude, strapless bra I wore specifically for this shopping trip. I put my hands on my hips and turn first one direction, then the other, giving myself a once-over.

I look like a professional athlete, all slim, sleek muscle and tight, toned back, butt and legs. I've never looked this good. Not that I check very often. I know what I look like. I've lived in this body my entire life.

But damn. I do look good. If a few hallucinations and medication changes led to this? Gotta take the wins where I can get them.

I try the midnight blue ball gown first and frown. It's a possibility. I try the next dress, pulling the deep red gown over my head. I admit, it's tastefully done, but it's not quite my style.

I move on to the last dress, a reflective silver, form-fitting gown, and slip it over my head. I know immediately—this is the one. The dress fits like a glove, hugging my chest and accentuating the curves of my breasts. The skirt falls in soft folds around my legs, reflecting light onto the walls, casting an ethereal glow. The fabric moves and flows over my body like water. I watch, hypnotized by my reflection. It makes me feel beautiful. It makes me feel powerful. I love it.

I exit the fitting room and walk to the couch where Ava sits. "So? What do you think?" I grin as her eyes widen. I know I look good. I slowly turn around so she can see the full effect of the glorious silver fabric as it hugs my body. I'm a walking, sparkling, rainbow hologram.

"Girl. Yes, to all of it." She gestures to all of me. "Gorgeous, beautiful, dazzling, exquisite." She rises from the couch and circles me, taking the dress in from every angle. "Whoever you're going with is going to be the luckiest guy at prom."

My cheeks warm, and I know I'm blushing. Ava has always been my biggest hype-woman. "Thanks, Ava." I open my arms for a hug, thankful that she's here, that's she's a

friend, and that we both found dresses that make us look better than we imagined we could.

“Of course.” She gives me a quick squeeze.

We finalize our purchases and walk out of the store with our dresses, the plastic garment bags draped over our arms. I turn toward Ava. “We’re meeting at your house at three tomorrow to get ready, right?”

“Yup! Don’t be late.”

“I would never.”

The next day I arrive at Ava’s house fifteen minutes after three. I barely slept, wondering if my dream date is going to show up tonight. Ava seems to be just as nervous as I am about her first official date with Nicole.

A few hours later, I stare, transfixed, at my reflection. Ava is almost done working her make-up magic on my face and I have to say...I look amazing. Glittery silver eyeshadow surrounds my eyes, and dark-winged eyeliner on my waterline. The sparkles continue from my eyelids down my cheek, making me look as though I’ve been kissed by a star or something. Well-placed blush and contour make my cheekbones look higher and more defined, and my lips are a daring red.

“Ava, stop, I look great.” I thought she was done with me ages ago, but she’s been fussing with my hair and makeup and sighing for at least thirty minutes.

“I know, it’s just...” Ava takes a step back from the chair she has me in, places her hands on her hips, and sticks her tongue out like she’s contemplating something. “I think maybe the eyeliner is still slightly uneven?”

I let out a sigh. “It’s perfect. And if it isn’t, then seriously, I don’t think anyone will notice.” Why would anyone care if one eyeliner wing is a smidgen off? “Besides, we’re going to be late. We need to go!”

She checks the time on her phone and realizes I’m right. We planned to arrive thirty minutes after prom starts, but at this rate, we’re going to be at least fifteen minutes later than that. I don’t want Nicole, or Ryker—if he’s real and actually shows—to think we are standing them up.

“You’re so right. Ok. Lemme just get my shoes on and we can go.” I watch as she rushes over to her closet to grab her new, fancy, rhinestone-covered high heels. She stumbles over her gown on her way, not quite tall enough in her bare feet to avoid tripping over the hem.

I stand up from the chair and grab my clutch from Ava’s nightstand. I wait patiently as she tries to slip her heels on while standing up, hopping up and down periodically to keep her balance.

“Ma, we’re ready!” Ava shouts down the stairs after composing herself, shoes securely on her feet. Her mom was kind enough to offer us a ride to prom so we wouldn’t have to walk to school in our over-priced dresses and stilettos.

After taking many, many pictures in front of the house, standing next to the car, under the huge maple tree in their front yard, we finally pile into the car. Mrs. Mitchell drops us off on the curved sidewalk near the school’s entrance and yells out the front window and reminds us to have fun, be safe, and keep her updated.

Ava waves as her mom drives off. Nicole, who has most likely been waiting outside for Ava to arrive, walks up to us. She rubs her hands over her dress and struggles to speak without stumbling over the words. She’s nervous, poor baby.

“H-hi Ava. You look...stunning.” Nicole can’t take her eyes off Ava, and I totally understand why. It’s true, she looks incredible.

“You look beautiful, yourself.”

Nicole's gown is elegant and simple, straight black skirt, body hugging, strapless bodice, and a heart-shaped, gold necklace resting against the skin between her breasts.

Ava reaches for the locket, her knuckles brushing Nicole's skin. I see Nicole take a sharp breath and their eyes lock and hold for a smoking hot minute. Maybe longer.

And Ava was worried her date might not be into her? Hah.

"Thanks. Would you wanna, maybe, head inside?" Nicole gestures over her shoulder toward the school entrance.

Ava looks at me, asking permission to abandon me on the school's front steps. Who am I to impede their new—and apparently, full speed ahead—romance? Ava is practically glowing. "You go ahead, Ava. I'll catch up when my date gets here."

"Are you sure? We can totally wait for you."

"Yeah, of course. You go have fun." I don't want to ruin their fun. Besides, if my imaginary date doesn't show up, I don't need an audience witnessing my very real disappointment.

"Okay. Well, if you're not in there soon, I'm going to come looking for you." Ava latches onto Nicole's arm and looks over her shoulder at me as they ascend the stairs—the only part of campus that looks elegant and not just old. I wink at her, and she laughs again, wiggling her eyebrows in response.

Soon, they disappear into the entryway. There are other students arriving with their dates. Five minutes pass. Ten. I'm still completely alone. Ryker is nowhere to be seen. I open my clutch and take out my phone to check the time yet again, tapping my toes nervously as I try to stay warm. It's fifteen minutes past when I asked him—or told him, rather—to be here.

What if he truly is all in my head? The thought makes me want to cry. Did my brain really construct a pretend boyfriend? For what? So I wouldn't feel lonely? And if Ryker is real, why would he bother to date me, once he figures out what I'm really like? He'd hear "I have hallucinations of people dying" and run for the hills. Who wouldn't?

My stomach rolls. I think I'm going to be sick.

The longer I wait, the more it's looking like Ryker-The-Imagined is the truth of things. Cold seeps into my bones. Damn, I should have brought a jacket, like my mom told me to. Not that I'll admit it to her. She hovers enough without encouragement.

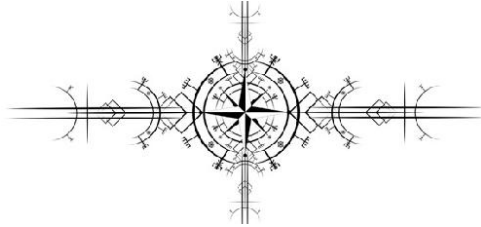
My breath shakes, my breathing quivers more and more the longer I wait. I'm using every ounce of will power, anxiety control, and positive self-talk to rein in my disappointment and fear. A tear slips out of my eye. I brush it away.

Damn it. I don't want to ruin Ava's beautiful make-up job. Although, if Ryker doesn't show up, I might as well just go home.

I'm so preoccupied with my obsessive doom spiral, I don't notice someone walking up to me until a light touch lands on my shoulder. Startled, I almost jump out of my skin. My breath catches in my throat as I see the one person I needed to see.

“Ryker.”

SEVEN



“Hi.” Ryker is in a black tux that hugs every inch of him like it was custom made. No pant legs pooling on top of his shoes, or thick seams hanging down his arms, well past his actual shoulders. His black tie has a unique blue and gold pattern with colors that match his eyes. Not that I’m staring, with my mouth hanging open, or anything stupid like that. He looks perfect.

“Dani. You are beautiful.”

Instead of saying ‘thank you’ like a reasonable young woman, I stutter and completely ruin the *Cinderella* effect I was going for. “I-I didn’t think you were coming.”

“I’m sorry. I know I’m a little late.” Ryker stands there with a concerned look on his face, staring right at me with those intense, magnetic eyes.

Nerves rattle through me and I hope he thinks I’m just shuddering from the cold.

My mouth opens and closes again. I do not know what to say.

Smooth. Real smooth. I can’t stop staring at his lips and thinking about how I’ve never been kissed before, and I’d really like to change that. With him.

“Are you okay?” His voice is rich in a way that reverberates in my head and his lilting accent is captivating. When I still don’t answer—because why act like an intelligent human *now?*—he steps forward and places a warm hand on my cheek. “Dani?”

I wrestle control away from the shy, scared, twelve-year-old nerd I carry around inside me. He's here. And, oh my god, he's hot. He puts all the other boys to shame. He wears his tux; the tux doesn't wear him. And his hand is still resting on my bare skin. I think my brain has stopped functioning.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay." His thumb moves up and down my cheek, slowly. I think he's trying to be comforting, but it's distracting. All I can focus on is his warm touch. His heat. The way he smells. And those full lips that are so, so, so close. I know he can't possibly comprehend just how much tonight is going to mean for me, if he's real. School outcast no one wants to date showing up at prom with someone like him? *Please be real*. The jury is still out, considering no one else has seen him yet.

Priorities, Dani. Confirm the dreamboat is real, and then flirt with him. "You're really late. I thought you decided not to come."

"Sorry, traffic was super bad. There was an accident on the highway. I wanted to message you to give you a heads up, but we never exchanged numbers."

I lean my cheek into his palm and close my eyes, and an emotion I don't recognize makes me believe him. It's weird and illogical, but when does that ever stop me? And he's right. Damn, we should have exchanged numbers. Although, if he's not real, it's not like he has an actual phone.

"It's okay. I'm glad you're here now." There's an awkward pause as I try to figure out what to say next. Unfortunately, there's no manual called 'How to Figure Out If Your Hot Date is Real: Five Easy Steps'.

Thankfully, he breaks the silence first. "So...wanna head in?" He lowers his hand, and my face feels cold and sad. I want more of that touching stuff.

"Yeah, sure. Sounds good. Let's go." I put my phone away, safely inside my sparkling clutch, and smile up at him as he extends his arm for me to take. Kind of old school, but I'm into it. He guides me up the school steps and through the front doors. I don't trip in my spike heels. I'm taking the win.

There's no one around to see us walk in. We must be some of the last people to arrive. In other words, I still have no way of knowing that he's a living, breathing boy.

Once we're inside, I take the lead. We follow the paper streamers and balloons stuck to the wall with tape until we're close enough to hear the music. I point to the gym where prom is being held, and where all my classmates are already gathered, and who may or may not see me walking in by myself. My heart beats faster with every step we take toward the muffled bass and chattering crowd. I hold my breath as we walk under the streamers taped to the door. The chaos and noise hits me like a shockwave. Anxiety grips me under my sternum and tugs, making it difficult to get enough air, and I stop dead in my tracks.

He notices. Of course he does. He lowers his arm and wraps it around my waist. When he pulls me closer, I go. He leans down until his lips graze my ear and talks to me in that intimate, I'm here with her, kind of way that turns the anxiety monster in my chest into a warm, fuzzy feeling. "Are you okay?"

I nod and turn to face him. Oh my God, his lips are close. We stare at each other. His gaze drops to my lips. I look at his, then back up to his eyes to discover he saw my moment of weakness.

"Is that the freak?"

The spell is broken. I know that snarky tone, and I know Madison is talking about me. Did Ryker hear that? I hope not.

His head whips around to focus on the source of the extremely loud—and rude—question.

I keep us on track to the gym, purposely ignoring her existence. And Isabella's. And whichever jock they each have on their arms tonight.

It takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the dark lighting of the space. I blink a few times, trying to get my bearings. There's a large crowd in the center of the dancefloor. Students flirt and grind on one another more than the teacher

chaperones would like, but the adults are outnumbered and not motivated.

We're seniors in high school, not six-year-olds. Most of the class is already over eighteen. The deep rumble of the bass vibrates in my chest, and the disco ball reflects the colored lights, making them dance across the room. There are a few students chatting on the outskirts of the space near the entrance, trying to get far enough away from the speakers to hear their thoughts.

A girl I've seen in passing—I think her name is Abbie—elbows her friend to get her attention and points in my direction. Subtle. Her friend turns around, eyes gloss over me and then lock on Ryker like a starving hyena. I lip read part of their conversation.

Oh my God. Who is that?

I don't know.

Holy shit. He's real. My super-hot, mysterious, vampire boyfriend, whose life I saved, is *real*. I think my eyes are wider than Abbie's, who is currently drooling over Ryker in all his glorious hotness.

My feelings are all over the place, like emotional whiplash. Relief is probably the most prominent. After all, now I know I'm not as detached from reality as I had feared. Then embarrassment, because I've made a fool of myself, repeatedly, in front of a beautiful guy because I thought he wasn't real. Followed closely by shock, because I still can't believe a guy this hot would be willing to take me on a date.

Fear slowly settles like an ice-cold rock in my gut... because he is real. Now he matters. I have to talk to him, flirt with him, dance with him, and somehow—somehow—hide the fact that he's way out of my league and shouldn't be here with a nerd like me. Just ask the horrified hyena, Abbie, over there. Or Madison. Isabella and their cheerleader friends, all of whom seemed to have formed a hunting party, are walking straight toward us like a cover-model assassin squad.

Who am I kidding? They are walking straight toward him. Not me. Ryker. My hot date. My. Date.

My face drains of all color, and a gymnast must be doing Olympic-level tricks in my stomach. I am so not okay with this.

Because being okay in this situation would be absurd.

What are they going to do? Try to lure him away from me? Monopolize his attention? Or worse, tell him everything that's wrong with me in their sweet-as-molasses, totally fake, voices?

The social killers moving toward us in a pack—their preferred method of hunting—draw even more attention as one person sees, nudges the person next to them, and on, and on.

More and more people turn, staring at us. I'm used to being the odd one out, but this amount of staring is making me uncomfortable. Even if I'm used to it, I can't imagine how Ryker must feel. As attractive as he is, I doubt he's experienced this many shocked—and let's be honest, downright hostile—stares before.

“Sorry about them.” I make a poor attempt to make him feel more comfortable. “They're just a bunch of nosy teenagers who don't know how to mind their own business.”

“I'm used to it.” His voice is confident as he stares directly at them, his arm firmly around my waist as he challenges them to continue being rude. He's not shaken at all.

Sexy. But also kind of weird. Who could be used to being stared at all the time? My curiosity gets the better of me. I have to ask. “What do you mean?”

“I know what it's like to be the one everybody stares at.” He shrugs casually. Like it's not a big deal. “I don't really fit in at my school. No one else there is like me.”

Maybe we're more alike than I thought. I open my mouth to ask more prodding questions, but he offers his free hand, cutting me off.

“Care for a dance?” He lets me go to bow at the waist and look up, one eyebrow arched in flirtatious challenge.

Is he trying to distract me from asking too many intrusive questions? I take one look at his lopsided grin, and I don't mind. I place my hand in his with a dramatic flourish and take the bait. He's too damn gorgeous. Sob stories can wait.

“Lead the way, good sir.” I bite my bottom lip, trying and failing to hold back a full-blown smile.

His grip is gentle but firm as he leads me past the hit squad, stopped dead in their tracks. I smile at Madison—god, I enjoy the moment a bit too much—as Ryker leads me onto the main dance floor. His hand is larger than mine, surrounding my palm in a comfortable warmth, and his calloused fingers brush against my skin. He must work with his hands or work out. An image of Ryker shirtless, showing off his sword skills, flashes in my memory. I try to put it out of my mind. It seems kind of wrong to be imagining someone's half-naked body while you're on a first date.

We enter the crowd, and Ryker releases my hand reluctantly, his fingers leaving mine one at a time. I miss his warmth already. I try to speak, but the music drowns out my voice; there is no chance of engaging in conversation. Ryker points to his ears, as if to say he can't hear anything, and starts moving to the beat, side stepping.

I can't help but giggle, nervous. I wipe my hands along the sequins of my dress. While he exudes bravado and charisma, I look like a fish out of water on the dance floor.

He raises his eyebrows and grins. He reaches for my hands and places them on his broad shoulders, forcing me to move with him. He pushes and pulls my arms with his body to get me to relax.

Oh my god. How fast is my heart racing? I swear it has beat out of my chest already. And his shoulders and arms and all his muscles are so defined and I'm touching them. *Breathe, Dani. Breathe.*

I slide my hands down his arms to grab his hands, and he twirls me under his arm before bringing me in close, pulling me against his chest and then letting go again.

I scowl, and look up to see mischief twinkling in his eyes. I see how it is. This is a game. Flirt until I feel like I'm going to explode, and then diffuse the bomb.

Two can play this game.

I take two confident strides toward him, hips swaying, and raise both my palms to his chest, then stray higher, wrapping them around his neck. He freezes, his body going silent and still like a predator locking onto his prey. But when he moves to grab my waist, I step just out of reach. He throws his head back and groans.

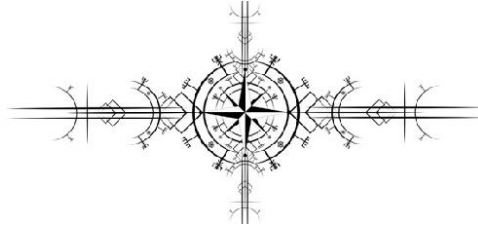
Good. Now he knows how I feel.

We continue like this, and I lose all sense of time. I'm lost in him, in his scent, in our proximity. I am conscious of every move he makes, and my every response. I can feel the seams of my dress against my waist, every brush of skin-on-skin, our shared breaths, and the too tight pounding in my chest. I can't stop staring, can't stop touching him. He is so close to me, so close, all I can think about is him, about us. His arm around my waist. His cologne is like a drug. I will never be able to smell citrus, wood or bergamot again without thinking of him.

Why does he have to smell so good? My entire being is revolving around him.

What does raw desire feel like? Because I'm thinking this might be it.

EIGHT



The loud dance beat ends and I smile up at him as we wait for the next song to start. It's slow and romantic. A love song I recognize immediately. Apparently, so does he.

I can't take my eyes off him. I want to touch him. Even the sleeve of his tux will do. Or his face. His hand. I want to hold his hand again, feel that connection. Ryker reaches for me, his hands comfortable around my waist, and pulls me forward until the bodice of my gown brushes the front of his black tuxedo jacket. We don't really dance so much as sway together. His body is so close to mine, the heat from his chest radiates through me. My heart pounds in my chest, beating like a metronome in time with the melody reverberating through the room. The blood rushing in my veins threatens to burn me up from the inside. I can't stop feeling the heat of his hands on my waist, or noticing how much taller he is, how easy it would be to lean in, just a bit, and rest my head on his shoulder, or brush my lips against the skin on his neck.

It's like he's a magnet and I'm a loose piece of metal. There's no resistance in me. My reaction to him feels basic and natural, as undeniable as the laws of physics. I know I shouldn't, but I turn my face into the side of his neck and inhale until his cologne takes over my senses. There's something about him that calls to me. It's intoxicating.

We're surrounded by a sea of people, but it feels as if we're in our own little bubble. I'm vaguely aware of the other students taking pictures of us—probably to gossip about later—but for the first time, I couldn't care less. I don't remember

the last time I had this much fun, and I'm damn well going to enjoy it. They play another slow one and I cling to him. He moves his hands from my waist to clasp them behind my back. Even better. I lean my cheek against his shoulder and enjoy the moment, give myself permission to be happy.

Eventually, the song stops, and the spell is broken. I don't want to let him go, but I know I don't have a choice. I look up and my heart stops. He's staring down at me, eyes burning with intensity. I'm lost in the moment, consumed by those crystal blue eyes, until someone pokes my shoulder from behind, trying to get my attention.

Ryker stiffens and turns, pulling me to his right side, away from whoever initiated the contact. I turn around with a smile on my face, expecting to see Ava.

It's no one friendly. Isabella and Madison stand shoulder to shoulder in their stunning red and black gowns, respectively. As usual, they both look too perfect to be real. My smile fades. The air temperature seems to drop to a chilly sub-zero, mean-girls' freeze.

"Oh my God! Dani? You look great, girl!" Isabella's talking to me, but her eyes are on Ryker. She steps closer to him and runs one hand down the lapel of his tux. "Why haven't you introduced us to your date?"

Ryker is next to me, his arm around my waist like I'm really his girlfriend. I straighten my spine and brace for what I know will be an unpleasant encounter. Next thing I know, he's placed his body between me and my so-called friends. A warm, dizzy feeling bubbles up in my chest.

I've been dealing with these two for more years than I care to remember. Maybe it's seeing Isabella's hand on him, maybe it's my dress, maybe it's the fact that I know I am here with the hottest guy in the room. Whatever it is, something snaps inside me.

I step in front of him and push her hand off his chest. "Isabella." I glance behind the two girls to see their momentarily forgotten dates staring, hands in their pockets,

unsure of what to do. “I think you two should pay attention to your own dates and leave mine alone.”

“Don’t be rude.” She glares at me, but her face transforms into a mask of feigned innocence as she looks up, over my shoulder, at Ryker. “I’m Isabella, by the way. This is Madison.”

“Ladies.” Ryker acknowledges her but doesn’t tell her his name. That fact makes me want to kiss him—even more than I already do. Which I am shocked is even possible. “Your dates appear to be wondering where you are. If you’ll excuse us, I believe Dani is thirsty.”

Hand at the small of my back, Ryker escorts me to a table with rows of bottled drinks. I wonder what happened to having an old-fashioned punchbowl. Actually, I know better. If we had one, no one would be brave enough to drink the punch. God only knows what some prankster would have poured into it by now.

Curious about Isabella’s reaction to what is probably her first ever rejection, I look back to see the two girls heading toward the exit. The two star basketball players they came with don’t look too happy.

I could give them a few pointers, starting with dating girls who don’t have *Titanic* sized icebergs in their chests where their hearts should be.

I take a sip of water, stalling. What am I supposed to say after that? Between practically drooling on his jacket and acting like a jealous girlfriend, I am at a total loss.

“Dani! I can’t believe you just did that!”

My smile is back at the familiar sound of Ava’s voice. I look up to find Ryker staring at me.

Why is he staring at me like that? Do I have mascara running down my cheek or something? I wipe the corner of my eyes, just in case. Turning, I see Ava is standing there with Nicole beside her, a surprised and impressed look on her face.

“I didn’t even see you come inside, and then you’re in a throwdown with Isabella?” She yells over the music, hugs me,

then steps back to inspect Ryker. She's not shy about it.

"It was nothing." I yell back, because a hip-hop dance beat now pounds through the speakers. Ava's eyes are wide, and one of her eyebrows is raised in an accusatory question. I can guess exactly what Ava is thinking. *'Why didn't you tell me your date was this hot?'*

"We just came in a few minutes ago." Ryker moves closer to me as he speaks, his hand once more a warm comfort at the small of my back. So warm and... protective?

It's like a giant weight has been lifted off my chest. I'm not anxious or nervous or worried about what any of the other idiots in this gym think of me. Want to call me a freak? Go ahead. Knock yourself out, because aside from the three people surrounding me, I don't give a shit.

Is this what confidence feels like? Is this what everyone else feels like all the time? If so, I must be a masochist, spending the last seven years of my life obsessing about what all these people think when they look at me. Hurting when I know they don't like me, think I'm weird, ugly, or any other negative adjective.

Ava is staring at him, more than a little curiosity in her eyes. Ryker nods his head in greeting. I grab Ryker by the arm and start walking toward the edge of the gym, as far away from the booming speakers and gyrating teenagers as we can get. Ava and Nicole follow close behind.

When we're far enough away that I can hear my own thoughts again, I stop walking. Ava is the first to speak.

"So, Dani. Wanna introduce us to your mystery man?" She is swinging her arms back and forth like a little kid, and her voice has a melodic rise and fall to it. She is so clearly eating this up, I can't help but roll my eyes.

I open my mouth to respond, but Ryker is the first to step in. "Hey, I'm Ryker." He shoves one hand in his pocket and holds the other out for a handshake. His cheeks are tinged pink from all the dancing we've been doing, and his previously well-groomed hair is now a mess on top of his head. Honestly,

I think it looks better, more... touchable. I'm aching to run my fingers through it.

Ava shakes her head, dismissing his outstretched hand. "Why so formal? Any friend of Dani's is a friend of mine." Instead of shaking Ryker's hand, Ava goes in for a brief hug. His eyes go wide in surprise, tensing up as she moves to embrace him. After the initial shock, he returns the affection, gently wrapping one arm around her shoulder in an awkward side-hug.

Damn it, Ava. She just met him, and here she is making all the moves. Sometimes, I wish I could be as bold as she is. She doesn't even hesitate before hugging the hottest guy in existence. But then, she's not into guys. I don't feel quite as pathetic when I remember how long it took her to work up the courage to ask Nicole to prom.

Ava looks so comfortable being all decked out, like she was born to wear elaborate gowns and four-inch stilettos. She's always been confident in her own skin.

Meanwhile, now that I'm no longer in an alternate reality with Ryker's arms around me, the sparkly material of my dress is starting to itch, my feet hurt, and I feel like the sweat on my forehead is melting my makeup.

Ava steps back from Ryker and introduces herself. "I'm Ava, Dani's best friend in the world." She gestures over her shoulder toward Nicole. "And this is Nicole, my date."

Nicole dips her chin like a regal princess would do, and Ryker responds in kind. They don't exchange a single word. Is Nicole jealous? Won't that make Ava excited. I grin as Ryker and Nicole end their odd inspection of one another. Apparently, the silent nod is enough for both of them. People confuse me sometimes.

Ava continues the conversation. "So, Ryker, are you from around here? What school do you go to? Dani has, conveniently, not told me much about you."

Gee, thanks Ava. Call me out in front of everyone, why don't you? I glance up at Ryker, but he catches me peeking

and grins. He wasn't supposed to know I have been keeping him all to myself like a precious secret. If I could bury my face in the skirt of my dress, I would.

Ryker, graciously, doesn't mention my embarrassment in his response. "Yeah, I live about an hour outside of Boston at a boarding school. It's called Forsetta Academy. Have you heard of it?"

Have I? How could I not? Who doesn't know about Forsetta Academy? It's the most elite, exclusive, prestigious, rich-kid school in this area of the country. Even though I'd already guessed he went to Forsetta, the confirmation still makes me choke a little. Suspecting and knowing are two different things. No wonder he's so confident. He's probably some big tech CEO's kid with a gazillion dollar trust fund.

I can tell Ava and Nicole are shocked as well, but they do a better job of playing it off than I do. Ava continues trying to socialize. "Oh, nice! So, what year are you?"

"I'm a senior." Ryker does a spectacular job of pretending not to notice my shock. He answers so nonchalantly, I wonder how many times he's had to play off the fact that he's gorgeous, and rich as hell. Probably a lot.

Ava carries the conversation. I don't know what I'd do without her. "So you're graduating? Are you going to be going to college?"

"Oh, the academy has a college connected to its campus, so all the seniors just matriculate to the college once they finish high school." He shrugs, as if it's no big deal. "What about you guys? Where do you plan to go after you graduate?"

Ava is the first to respond. "I got into Boston University, so I think I'm going to stay in state." She was so excited when she got in on scholarship. She's always wanted to study journalism and stay close to her family.

Nicole answers next. "I have a full-time job waiting for me so I can help support my little sister. I need to help my dad. After she graduates high school, I'll think more about college."

Huh, I didn't know that. Although, it's not like we've ever had a chance to talk. Ava looks at Nicole affectionately and puts a hand on her shoulder. I know Ava will tell me all the details later.

The three of them turn to me, waiting for me to answer. Unlike almost every other student, I've been a little too preoccupied lately with my mental health to even think about college. Before I knew it, the application deadlines had passed. "I don't know what I'm going to do yet. Maybe take a gap year?"

Ryker looks at me curiously and nods his head, brows furrowed in deep thought. He's clearly thinking about something. I wish he'd share with the class. I open my mouth to ask him about it, but I'm interrupted by shouts of surprise from my left.

A group of students is standing in a circle, chattering nervously. Ryker, Ava, Nicole, and I walk over to get a better look at the cause of the commotion. In the center of all the students, a guy is curled up in the fetal position, clutching at his right arm, eyes clenched in pain. Is that Zach?

"What happened?" Ava asks.

A girl I recognize from my freshman year geography class leans over him in the dark blue dress I'd tried on at the store. It looks better on her.

"Zach was trying to do a backflip." Her arms encircle her waist to self-soothe. I have a feeling she doesn't do well when other people are in pain. "He uh...landed on his arm instead of his feet."

I can practically hear Ava's eyes roll into the back of her head. "Wonder who he was trying to impress?" Quietly, so just I can hear, she finishes her thought. "Leave it to horny teenagers to do stupid shit trying to get laid."

She's not wrong. I don't think attempting a backflip, in a suit, on hard gym floors was well thought out.

But then, Zach seemed like one of the nice kids at this school. He was quiet, and a bit of a nerd, but he helped me in

chemistry when I needed it. And he never treated me like I was a freak.

I glance around. There's a couple standing across from me, one of them on the phone with emergency services. On my right side are a handful of people filming him moaning in pain, and chortling. A girl in a dress runs to the opposite side of the gym, no doubt to get the attention of one of the teacher chaperones. The rest are too stunned to do anything. The boy, Zach, is alone on the floor, face contorted in pain.

I push my way through the video recording crowd, shoving people to the side. If no one will comfort him, I will. No one deserves to be in pain alone.

Desperation rises in my gut. I need to help him. It's like a roar in my blood shouting at me to hurry, he's injured, vulnerable. It's as if I can hear him asking for help as the gawking hordes loom over him...posting on their socials.

I'm going to keep them away from him if it's the last thing I do. I am going to wreck those stupid people and their phones.

I'm almost to the front of the crowd when a strong arm wraps around my waist and pulls me back. Annoyed, I turn around to glare at whoever is keeping me from going to help Zach.

My gaze meets Ryker's. I glance down at his hand, then back up to his face, my eyebrows raised in irritation. I am willing to fight him to escape. Kick. Scream. Whatever it takes. I have to help. I *need* to get to Zach.

"What the hell, Ryker? Let me go!" I can't tell if my heart is racing because of adrenaline, or because I'm so intensely aware of his touch. I decide it's both.

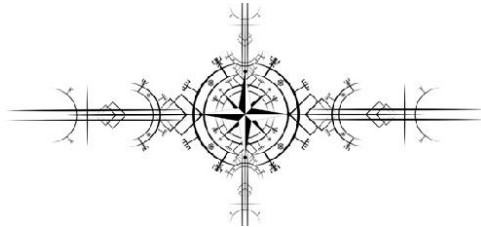
I try to pull out of his grip, but he doesn't release me. His grasp is gentle, but firm, and there's no way I can escape his hold without hurting myself. I lift my opposite hand and push against his chest. Rage at how much those callous videos will hurt Zach is a living thing inside me now. It's insane. I know it doesn't make sense, but my life rarely does.

Ryker glances over his shoulder. I follow his gaze to see the girl I assume is Zach's date coming back with two teachers hot on her heels. Ryker turns his head back to me and dips his face close to mine. He drops his voice. "Please, Dani. You can't!" Ryker's eyes desperately search mine, begging me to relent, to understand.

Well, I *don't* understand. "What do you mean, I can't?" I will do what I want, when I want, and he can't tell me what to do. And right now, I need to keep the school vultures away from Zach. "Let me go!"

Instead of letting me go, he lifts me off my feet and carries me away from the crowd.

NINE



No one notices Ryker literally carrying me out of the gym, despite the fact that I'm causing a commotion. No one notices my clutch hit the floor, the flimsy strap broken. Not even Ava. They're all too focused on Zach's broken arm. I look over my shoulder one more time to make sure the teachers have taken charge. One of them is shooing away the kids and their stupid cell phones. Good.

"Put me down!" I curse at Ryker as he carries me out of the gym and into the cool night air.

Ryker doesn't stop until we are all the way out to the school's newly budding garden. It's on the opposite side of the parking lot, far enough away that no one is going to hear me scream. The school cleared a section of forest to expand the lot last year. There's a section of grass separating the cars parked on the far end and the tree line several steps away. We're in ankle deep grass, on the edge of the forest, when he finally puts me back on my feet. My heels instantly sink into the soft ground, the pointed tips doing to the dirt what I want to do to Ryker. Attack.

"I'm sorry, Dani, it's just—"

"What the fuck, Ryker?!" At this point, I'm seething with anger. Who does he think he is? If I were a cartoon character, there would be smoke coming out of my ears. I know something is wrong with my reaction—now and when I saw Zach in pain—but I can't seem to control my emotions right now. Which is damn inconvenient. I am normally the queen of

hiding what's going on inside my head, otherwise I'd be locked up in a mental institution.

“I should be asking you the same thing! What were you thinking?”

“What?”

“You can't help him. Not like that. Not with everyone watching.” He raises his voice to match mine, and I realize he's actually angry. About what?

“What difference does it make if I help Zach? He's one of the few decent humans in this school.”

“What difference does it make? Are you trying to get us all killed?”

Is he serious right now? I'm so frustrated I can't think. And 'get us killed'? That makes zero sense. “What don't you understand about 'let me go'?”

“I was trying to protect you. I saw how concerned you were, and I thought...” He fumbles over his words and runs both hands through his already tousled hair. He seems genuinely upset, which I don't understand at all.

“Okay. You thought what? Please, explain.” I cross my arms over my chest, foot tapping at full speed on the grass.

He rubs both hands over his face, grunting in frustration. “Okay...okay.” He lets out a deep, shaky breath and runs his fingers through his hair again.

Is he stalling? What is going on here? Is he one of those overly possessive boys who loses their shit if their girlfriend talks to another guy? Because if that's the case, I don't care how hot he is, he's gone. Kicked to the curb. No way in hell I'm putting up with that. And damn it, I hope I'm wrong because I really, really like him.

He takes a few steps toward me. His tongue darts out to wet his lower lip. His shoulders tense and he's acting like he doesn't know what to do with his hands. In pockets. Out. Clapsed together in front of him. Back into his pockets.

Is he biting his lip? I try not to be too distracted by that. He's standing only a few inches away from me now and his voice is quiet, like he's telling me a secret I am suddenly desperate to hear.

"To be honest, seeing him in so much pain, I was afraid you would..." His words fade away. They were barely a whisper to start with, as if speaking them aloud is dangerous. My anger deflates as he continues fumbling. "I didn't respect your boundaries. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I didn't think. I should have trusted you to do the right thing. I panicked."

I don't understand what he's thinking—not completely—but I know what "sorry" means. I also have confidence in my ability to determine a genuine apology from a lie. He means every word. Our eyes meet and I realize exactly how close he is. My anger abandons me, and the emotional void it leaves behind immediately fills with nerves. How did we get so far away from everybody? I glance around, and aside from Isabella and Madison smoking god-knows-what in the garden across the field, we're completely alone. They must've been outside since before Zach's accident.

His cologne tempts me to move even closer, to lift my hands and place them on his shoulders, to trust him. Want him. I want to forget about the last few minutes and get back to where we were on the dance floor. I want to walk right back into his arms and ask him to wrap them around me. The handful of lights in the parking lot cast shadows over his face. Rather than make him less attractive, the shadows highlight his cheekbones and full lips. My chest feels too tight, like my lungs are jittery. It's hard to breathe.

I can feel his gaze burning into my soul as he studies my face. Is he feeling what I'm feeling? My newfound courage doesn't extend far enough to ask him.

The silence stretches as I consider my options. Forgive him and go back inside? Tell him I want to go home and bring an end to the evening? I could take him back inside and act like I'm mad for the rest of the night, but temper tantrums aren't my style.

I stare at him, unsure. He stares back, taking some time exploring the rest of my body with his eyes, lingering on every curve. This dress is tight, and it doesn't leave very much to the imagination. I know I look good. Hell, I look amazing, with the help of Ava's incredible make-up skills.

His expression makes me burn up in the cool spring air. Yes, this is definitely *want*. Pheromones and sexual attraction. I've read about desire in books, but reading about a thing, and feeling like I am literally about to burst out of my skin, are two very different things.

Ryker clears his throat. "Dani, I... I know we just met. But for some reason, I feel like I've known you forever. I don't understand it."

My breath hitches as he reaches for my right hand. He weaves our fingers together, somehow managing to hold on to me and caress my palm.

I had no idea such a small thing could consume me. My entire being focuses on that hand. His skin touching mine.

"Please, tell me you feel it, too." He lifts my hand, presses it against his chest, and covers it with both of his.

I lightly dig my fingertips into his rock-hard muscle, playing with the fabric of his dress-shirt. To my satisfaction, I feel his breath catching every time my hand moves. I step even closer.

He slides his arms around my waist, pulling me into full body contact. My gaze lifts to meet his, and my heart forgets to beat when I see the way he's looking at me, like I'm beautiful and desirable and he wants to be right here with me. He's going to kiss me. I can feel it. I know it. My first kiss. It seems like I've been waiting for this moment forever.

I slide my hand up over his shoulder and around his neck.

"Yes, I feel it." My fingers play with his hair. The dark strands are even softer than I imagined. I can't look away, caught by the longing I see in his eyes as his lips move closer. Closer. I feel the warmth of his breath on my lips and pull his head down the rest of the way.

Ryker's lips find mine, and I'm lost. His arms wrap around me in a tight hold I have no desire to break. I want to melt into him. Be closer. I want more.

One kiss blends into another, and another. The moment his lips break contact, I am reaching for him. I hope I'm doing this right, because I never want it to end. I want him to kiss me over and over and over. I bury my fingers in his hair as he nibbles on my bottom lip. I open my mouth and he doesn't hesitate. His tongue slips inside to slide against mine.

The soft moan that escapes my throat is a shock. I wrap my free hand around him and hold on. I trust him to be my anchor. I'm off balance. I don't care.

He slides one hand up my spine, tangles his fingers in my hair and holds me in place as he finally deepens the kiss.

This should feel weird, right? Tongues sliding together, me tasting the inside of his mouth?

Except, he tastes good. Smells good. His body is so easy to lean into, pressed to mine, every muscle solid, and strong, and hot. So freaking hot. I struggle for air. Breathing feels like a waste of time when I could be kissing him instead. I'm trembling. Shaky. Heat spreads through my body and my head spins. I forget where we are. I forget everything but the way he feels.

His arms tighten and he opens his hand to hold the back of my head as his kiss becomes hungrier. More aggressive.

He wants me. The knowledge makes me giddy, and I move, exploring his body for the first time. I lower my hands to the opening of his jacket and slide them inside so I can trace the lines of his body through the thin fabric of his shirt. I don't worry about where we are or who might see us. I don't worry about the fact that I'm clumsy, risking life and limb wearing these ridiculous, high-heeled shoes.

I trust him to keep me from falling.

I don't trust anyone, but with him, it's so easy to let go. This has never happened to me before. I have never felt like this. Ever.

He steals his lips away. Like a wild woman, I chase him, trying to find them. But then his lips graze the corner of my mouth. My cheek. I turn my head a bit because this feels like heaven, too.

He leans in, kissing a trail from my lips, down the side of my neck, to my collarbone. His fingers work their magic, tangled in my hair, as his lips explore my skin. I don't even realize we're still outside until the sound of a distant siren steals the moment from me. I become aware of the cool breeze flowing over my heated skin.

"Dani." He rumbles against my neck, sending shivers down my spine.

I don't want this to end. I close my eyes and hold on as his kiss travels to the other side of my neck. I have my hands on his back. Touching him is every bit as addictive as I thought it would be. Muscles. Heat.

He smells so damn good.

Eyes closed, I don't notice right away when seeing the backs of my eyelids becomes something else. Deeper. Darker. True black. I'm content being in his arms. This is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

Until Ryker's touch fades, as if his strong arms no longer exist. The ragged sound of my own breathing fades, like I had the speakers on ten and turn them down, down, down until there is no sound left.

No sound. No light. No touch. Nothing, as if I'm floating in darkness.

Shit, not now. Please, *please* not now.

As usual, my freakish mind doesn't give a shit what I want, it just tears me away from this moment and forces me to watch another.

A hallucination while I'm in the middle of making out with the hottest guy I've ever seen? This must be the worst timing in existence. If I could flip the 'off' switch to my brain, I would. No such luck.

All I can do is wait for the vision to play out.

Neatly trimmed hedges stand in a long line, separating a freshly mowed, grassy area from the tar and asphalt of a parking lot.

Strategically placed flower beds, borders lined with oversized bricks, are scattered in a pattern I've seen hundreds—probably thousands—of times.

Two walking paths, lined with packed dirt and gravel, weave their way around and between the bright flower beds. They connect the building I know is behind me to the lot, packed with cars. It's night. Dark. The school garden on the far side of the building looks like a haunted cemetery, minus the headstones. Something is moving...

My vision shifts, just a touch, and I see the steps leading up to the school where I met Ryker.

What the hell? This makes no sense. Why am I hallucinating about the school?

Images, scenes, flash before my eyes, faster than they've ever done before. I am dizzy. Disoriented. This is different from all my other visions. It's too fast. Too jumbled. There's little to no chance of understanding what I see before one image is gone, replaced by the next.

A guttural, phlegmy roar comes from the forest not far from where I know, right now, in real life, Ryker and I are standing.

Birds scatter from the trees in an unnatural flurry.

Ryker screams at someone to run.

A creature emerges from the shadowed tree line, something so disgusting it can't be real. I've seen monsters like this before. A long time ago, a recurring nightmare from my childhood.

Why is that childhood trauma coming back now?

The thing lumbers on all fours, mold and rotting flesh drips off its body, leaving a slime trail in its wake. Four rows of teeth, all lethally sharp, are clearly on display as its howl pierces my ears. The rancid smell of decay wafts across the grass.

The vision flashes to Ryker. He's in the garden. He collapses in pain, holding his gut. There's blood soaking the gravel path...so much blood. His blood.

I'm powerless as I wait for the life to fade from his eyes.

I watch him die. Again. Just like I have dozens of times before.

Ryker shudders and takes his final breath. The creature roars in victory.

Deep inside, I'm screaming. Desperate.

Like I'm water being poured into a cup, I crash back into the real world, into my body, the tight dress, and Ryker's arms wrapped around me, not in passion. Not anymore. He's not kissing me.

I open my eyes to find him staring at me.

The numbness fades. My senses come roaring back to life. It's too much, like a bomb has gone off in my stomach.

Ryker's arms are stiff, more like a cage than a caress. The cool breeze carries a foul odor that I know isn't real, it's just lingering in my mind. A trick.

I'm too hot, not in the sexy way, in the 'I'm going to faint' way. I can't breathe. I can't stop shaking. Everything is spinning and I can't get my bearings.

Holy shit, my hallucinations have never affected me like this before. I feel like I'm dying, like my heart is going to explode and my lungs are on fire.

I blink and force myself to pull fresh air into my lungs. Blink again. More cool air. More. God, I feel like I'm going to be sick.

My head clears enough for me to finally focus.

Ryker is right in front of me, concerned and confused, one arm supporting my back, the other stroking my cheek.

“Dani? Dani? Come on... What’s happening? Talk to me.” His voice shakes and I wonder if it’s because kissing me wrecked his control—like it did mine—or if I have completely freaked him out with my weird mental gymnastics.

Right now, I fucking loathe myself. Why? Why do I have to be this way? Why can’t I have one normal night? One date? One kiss with a hot guy?

“I’m sorry.” I tear my face away from his hands and twist out of his arms. I collapse to my knees. My stomach heaves, empties its contents. The grass is cold under my hands as I support my weight. I focus on the cool, green grass as I heave again.

Well, there goes my dinner.

He kneels beside me, holding my hair and rubbing my back as I continue to dry heave. “Wow, was the kiss that bad?” He chuckles as he tries to lighten the mood. He’s not running for the hills, which is a relief. But what am I supposed to do now? Ask him for a piece of gum?

There won’t be any more kissing. Damn it. I’d be too self-conscious of my puke-mouth, and I know he doesn’t want a taste anyway.

I used to see those creatures in my dreams as a child, their soulless black eyes stalking me as I slept. The nightmares would scare me awake, and I would tiptoe into my parents’ bed. I would feel better beside my mom and dad, but not quite safe enough to sleep. Judging by the mishmash of rice and veggies on the ground, they still terrify me.

Or maybe it’s my reaction to watching Ryker die. Again.

When I stop retching, I run shaky hands through my hair and crawl away from the mess to sit on the grass. “Ugh, this is so gross. I’m so sorry you had to see this.”

Now that the initial shock has worn off, I realize this is the single most embarrassing situation I have ever been in. Ever.

Black out, hallucinate make-believe creatures, while making out with the first hot guy ever who was brave enough to kiss me, and then puke? Yeah, not on today's bingo card.

"Don't worry about it. I'm not squeamish. What happened?" Ryker continues to rub my back in soothing circular motions, but his voice has an edge to it. It's sharp, distressed. Worried. "One moment we were...well, you know...and the next you went limp in my arms. Your eyes were open, but you weren't seeing me."

I groaned. "Sorry about that." It's true, I was. No one should be involved with my visions except me, Dr. P, and my parents. "I didn't mean to."

"What do you mean?" His lips are pursed together, and his eyebrows are so deeply furrowed I would bet good money he's going to have permanent frown marks by the time he's twenty-five.

I sit there, holding my knees to my chest and biting nervously on my thumb. How should I answer him? I was hoping I wouldn't have to tell him my medical history at all. Maybe if we were dating, like a real couple, I would tell him everything when I felt ready. But right now, even though we just met, there's no use trying to pretend I don't have issues. The cat is so far out of the bag, it already ran away and disappeared down the street.

I sigh and open my mouth, but before I get a word out, a guttural, phlegmy roar comes from the forest. A flock of birds that were sleeping in the trees chatter and leave their nests, flying away in a panic.

What the hell was that? This is way too familiar for comfort.

Ryker's face is ghostly pale. "Fuck, I must have lost control." He leaps up and paces. Three steps. Back and forth. Back and forth, in an agitated frenzy. His gaze darts from the edge of the forest to me, still sitting on the ground.

Lost control? What the hell does that mean?

He grabs me by the arm and pulls me to a standing position.

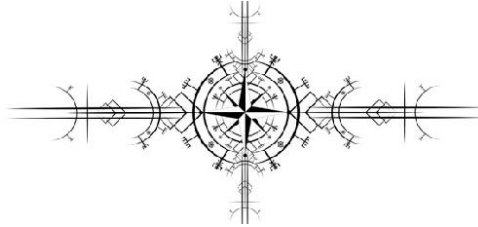
“Dani, we gotta go. Now.”

For the second time tonight, he yanks me in whatever direction he feels like. We’re going to have a conversation about that. Later. Right now, I’m perfectly fine with heading in the opposite direction of the scary sound.

“What was that?” My breath is uneven as I ask the question. Ryker seems panicked, and I figure I have the right to know why.

He never gets the chance to answer me. I barely register a rustling sound to the right before one of those nightmare-inducing creatures leaps in front of us, blocking our path.

TEN



“What is that?” I shake my head to clear my mind. I can’t believe this is real. I don’t want this to be real.

“I’m so sorry, Dani. Shit!” Ryker shoves me behind him and faces off with the creature. Monster? Thing.

The moment the creature’s eyes—I assume that’s what the big, rolling, marble-like things that stick out of its head must be—lock on Ryker, it lifts onto its back two legs like a bear and makes a howling sound so resonant, the noise slams onto my head like an icepick. I cover my ears, but that is almost no help. It’s too loud. Too close. Worse, years of nightmares about creatures like this crowd into my mind like an ant swarm. So many. Too many. They drown out everything else.

These things can’t exist in the world. None of this makes any sense.

Ryker takes a step back, arm out, shoulder in front of me like a shield. He moves me with him, slowly, like he is trying to sneak away before the monster notices.

Our small step back cuts the creature’s bellowing short, and it drops to all fours, staring straight at us.

“You aren’t supposed to move.” Everyone knows that. Bear up on its hind legs is trying to see its enemy. This thing looks stupid. Dumber than a bear. If its face wasn’t almost human, I wouldn’t think it had a brain at all. Like that thing in *The Blob* movie.

“We don’t have a choice. It just summoned its friends.”

Oh, shit. “It has friends?”

One slimy shoulder lifts and slams back down as the thing moves closer. The creature looks, and smells, exactly like I remember from my dreams; like fresh meat left in the bottom drawer of the refrigerator for at least a month past its ‘use by’ date, when the raw meat has turned gray and smells like—death. Rot. Like this thing taking another lumbering step toward us.

I step back. Stumble. Grab Ryker’s shoulder to steady myself.

Fuck these high heels. And this dress. I feel like I’m a gift-wrapped monster snack.

Ryker bends his arm and rotates his shoulder back so he can grab onto me. “We’re going to have to run, Dani.”

“Okay.” I kick off my shoes.

“I’ll distract it. You run back into the school.”

“What about you?”

“I’m faster than I look. I’ll lead it away.”

“But—this is not a good plan. I hate this plan.”

“I’ll be fine, right behind you. Trust me.” Ryker sounds calm as it crawls, stalking us on all fours. It is about the size of a small horse, but shaped like it could have been a man, once upon a time. Or multiple men. It uses four limbs to walk, but I swear I see ribs, bones, fingers and feet sticking out of its body from places they shouldn’t be. “Dani?”

I try to answer, I do, but I can’t stop staring. Analyzing. Wondering why I would dream about something so disgusting. Most of its bulk isn’t covered in hair, but in wet, greyish clumps of what I can only assume used to be muscle, except none of the attachments are in the right places. This monster looks as if Dr. *Frankenstein* randomly sewed parts of multiple corpses together, animated it, and then let it all rot. The decaying flesh slides ever so slowly down its body and drips onto the ground in sloppy clumps. The green grass dies and

turns yellow when the muck covers it, as if the creature itself is dripping acid.

Its face is a mass of twisted flesh and bone. The two eyes that stare at me from the top left side of its head are the only things on its face that look like they belong, eyes the same dark, soulless black as the ones that belonged to the creatures from my dreams.

The one in front of me has no nose, only two holes that make it seem like a large reptile. The mouth is a gaping hole of black teeth, four rows of jawbones stacked one behind another. Its teeth are sharp and jagged. It reeks, the repugnant odor making bile rise in my throat.

“Dani? Are you with me?”

“Yes.”

“Ready to run? We are out of time. Its friends will be here any minute.” We take another joint step back and I realize Ryker has been turning us just enough to give me a straight shot at the entrance to the school. I judge the distance and hike up my skirt so that I don’t trip.

“Dani?”

“Okay. Please be careful. Please.” Please don’t get eaten by this thing. The thought of losing him now is so bleak and depressing I can’t finish it. I just found him. I just kissed him. I care far too much already. Nothing about this makes sense, me and him, and I don’t care. Nothing in my life has ever made sense.

The creature’s eyes dart back and forth between me and Ryker, as if taking its time, contemplating who to kill first. Ryker takes advantage of its hesitation, shoving me away. “Dani, go! Run!” The command is raw and guttural, impossible to ignore.

I take off, running as fast as I can toward the school. Adrenaline rushes through my bloodstream like a bomb went off inside me. There is no thinking. I have tunnel vision. All I see is the grass in front of my feet. The door that leads to sanctuary inside the school building. All I hear is blood

pounding inside my skull and the rush of air as it bursts in and out of my lungs. It's as if I'm breathing fire.

I'm halfway there. He said he'd be right behind me. I can't hear him. Where is he?

I risk a glance back over my shoulder. I expected him to follow. When I look behind me, I see he's still staring the creature down. He has a dagger in one hand and is slowly circling the monster, waiting for it to strike.

Shit. What is he thinking? Is he trying to buy me time? I don't need more time. I'm almost there. Worse, that thing is huge. I count eight legs sticking out of the goo.

I slow to a jog, then stop, turning completely to watch him and the creature circle one another. As Ryker did with me, with each step he's moving just enough not to incite an immediate attack, but positioning himself for a straight shot away, toward the school's garden.

No. Oh, God. Shit.

I know how this ends. I just saw it. There are more of them in the garden. Waiting.

Isabella and Madison were over there! As I turn to look for them, a blood-curdling scream comes from their direction. Then another.

Ryker must hear it, too, because he takes his eyes off the creature in front of him. Just a split second. That's all it takes. The creature lunges, but Ryker is sprinting toward the garden, in the direction of the screams. What is he doing?

No. He can't go over there. It's an ambush. They are here to kill him.

Why? Why? Why?

I sprint toward him, away from the school. Away from safety. I see Isabella stumble toward the school building. Where is Madison?

Is she okay? Is she hurt? Dead? I don't know. All I know is more of those things are waiting. They'll gut him. Cut him

open. He'll bleed out, blood soaking the gravel path. Just like my vision.

“Ryker! Run! They're in the garden! It's a trap! It's a trap!”

I scream at him, my legs pumping as fast as I can make them go, faster than any track meet or any workout I've ever run. A terrified part of me knows it's not fast enough.

I push my muscles to their limit, trying to reach him in time. I don't know what I can possibly do to help him against that thing, but two is better than one. It has to be. We'll run for the woods. Anywhere but that fucking garden. Literally anywhere.

“Dani, no! Get back!”

“The garden! It's a trap!” I sprint, my gaze dropping to the abandoned high heels shoes on the grass. The four-inch points aren't exactly one of my grandad's shotguns, but they're better than nothing. That thing has eyes, doesn't it?

I'm forty meters away when the creature lunges at Ryker. He is looking at me, yelling at me to run.

My heart stops dead in my chest. I yell out a warning, but it's too late.

The creature knocks Ryker to the ground with a sickening crunch. I glance down, trying to gauge how injured he is. I can't tell, but he's moving. I see his arms and legs grappling with the thing, fighting.

Ryker is back on his feet and lunging for the creature. The dagger in his hand is coated in something so dark and disgusting I can't make myself admit what it is. I'm halfway there. They're face to face; their bodies move in a blur.

How can something so gross move that fast? The lumbering, sloppy stomping was a ruse. It's agile. Quick. It looks like it's trying to land on top of Ryker and smother him on the ground. Cover him completely.

Every time Ryker disappears, my mind goes numb until I see him again, slicing and fighting, throwing the thing off him

with strength I didn't know he possessed. The monster is big and heavy. Ryker isn't going to last much longer.

Ryker lands a kick and follows up with a hard arching swing of his blade, slicing the thing's neck so deep the dark liquid flows like a river down its body. The creature hisses and growls. Ryker kicks it again. This time, the creature's head snaps back with a satisfying crack.

Did Ryker break its neck? Is it going to go down from the blood loss?

Somehow, the thing doesn't seem bothered at all. If anything, it seems mildly annoyed and starts swiping at Ryker faster. It's making that horrible howling noise again, the one that shoves hot pokers into my skull. I am holding my skirt with both hands as I run; I can't cover my ears.

I clench my teeth against the pain and keep running. Ryker dodges multiple hits with expertise, slicing the creature over and over, but I'm terrified that sooner or later, his luck will run out.

I'm about ten steps away. The creature connects and Ryker is sent flying. His body slams into the ground. A gash appears in his side, fresh blood spilling out.

I scream for him, but he doesn't move. The creature moves in for the kill, ignoring me as it makes its way toward Ryker. It takes a few more steps and raises its arm high.

That thing is going to kill him.

"Ryker!" I run, but I'm too late—the creature swipes at Ryker with so much force I feel the aftershocks under my bare feet. I lose sight of Ryker's body behind the bulk of the creature. I can't see.

He's dead. He must be.

I scream at the thing, trying to distract it, get it away from him.

The creature turns to look at me and I stop dead in my tracks. Despite the multiple cuts and bleeding parts, it appears

unaffected. Like a zombie, impossible to kill. It just keeps going.

I'm frozen in place until I see a blur of movement. Ryker. Impossibly fast. He's behind the creature with that blade.

With a shout full of rage, Ryker cuts through the back of the thing's neck, steps back, and with one swift kick, sends the creature's head flying from its body.

With a sob of relief, I take off at a jog, heading toward him. He's alive. The thing's body—whatever it was—is dissolving into a disgusting goop that is sinking into the grass, like the ground is swallowing the corpse, pulling the body down like it fell into quicksand.

A dark form moves directly behind Ryker. Shadows don't move. It's the other one.

“Behind you!”

I scream, but it's too late. This one is smaller, maybe half the size of the first, but faster and still two or three times bigger than Ryker. With a screech that makes my bones rattle, it attacks, leaping at Ryker with a lightning-fast swing of one of its disgusting arms. It connects with Ryker's back. His body flies through the air toward me and slams into mine. We both hit the ground hard.

I roll to get him off me and look down at him, limp in my arms. His eyes are closed, his hand still wrapped around the hilt of the long, pointed dagger. He's still breathing. Thank god he's still breathing.

My heart beats wildly against my chest as I take in the sheer amount of blood oozing through his suit. Shit. Just how badly is he hurt?

I hold Ryker close and sob into his shoulder. I shake him. “Ryker! Don't you dare die. Wake up!”

I turn my head to see the creature slowly stalking toward me, taking its time. What is it doing? Savoring the moment? Enjoying our pain?

My chest heaves at the thought of Ryker slipping away. Of never getting the chance to explore the spark between us. Of losing him forever.

“Please, Ryker, stay with me.” I can barely understand my speech through my tears. Each word is a struggle. A hot iron rod burns in my throat as I try to stifle my sobs. His blood coats my hands, leaving streaks of crimson where I caress his face. The front of my dress is soaked through, and my thighs are sticky with his warm blood.

Heat rises in my chest. It rushes over me, traveling down my arms and flooding into him, leaving a painful tingling in its wake. Energy radiates from my hands as I hold on to Ryker.

He takes a deep breath. The blood stops flowing fresh and hot until only the sticky remains soak his clothing. The gaping wound in his side heals before my eyes, the gash on his face closing, fading away until the skin beneath is healthy. Perfect.

He gasps for air as he regains consciousness, looking around frantically before finally settling his gaze on me. He looks like I feel: shocked. Raw. Amazed at what just happened.

I clasp his hand, relief making me tremble violently. “That thing is about to eat us.”

The rotting monster lets out an ear-piercing shriek, as if it knows what I have done and is furious, frustrated to be denied its kill.

An answering bellow comes from the direction of the garden, and I grimace. I was wrong. There was more than one over there.

Rage floods me now. Years of nightmares, torment and terror boil up from my gut as I face the worst thing I have ever seen in my dreams. This disgusting creature has been threatening me, scaring the shit out of me, for a long, long time. Maybe it’s stupid, but I refuse to die huddled over Ryker like a coward.

I stand up slowly, determined not to let the abomination in front of me get anywhere near Ryker. I’ll claw its disgusting

bobble eyes out with my bare hands if I have to. I took biology. I popped the eyes out of frog for a dissection grade. I know how it's done. "Come on, asshole!"

The monster makes a gurgling sound like it's trying to talk to me—but can't, because its throat is rotten jelly. It blinks slowly, its eyelids move down and back up over black, soulless eyes.

I see Ryker move up next to me, the dagger in his hand, ready to fight. He steps in front of me like some kind of medieval knight saving a damsel in distress—and I am in freaking distress.

I take a step back. Two.

The creature paces, moving left then right, testing Ryker, just like the other one did.

"It's waiting for more of them. The second they get here, we're dead." Ryker is on his feet, covered in blood, but steady. I can't believe he's standing at all, even if he does look exhausted. "We don't have much time."

Ryker lunges, moving so fast I can barely keep track of where he is. It's like I blink, and he's already made a huge gash in the creature's side.

The glob monster opens its mouth and screeches at us, but it doesn't charge. Maybe it's scared to fight Ryker alone since its much bigger companion is now nothing more than a thin coat of slime on the grass, its body gone, sucked into the ground. It's staring at us, the disgusting black eyes jumping from Ryker to me and back, over and over, like ping-pong balls trapped inside the sockets.

Moving slowly, I take a few steps to my side and pick up my abandoned high heels. They aren't much, but it's better than standing here with nothing to use in a fight but my newly manicured fingernails.

"Dani, move. Go to the middle of the parking lot."

"But the other one—" There is at least one more of these monsters in the garden area. At *least* one. Probably more.

“I know. I heard it. We have to get out of here.”

As if to emphasize the urgency, the wounded creature in front of us screeches again. An answering cry comes from the school gardens. Another from somewhere in the trees, not close, but close enough.

“Fuck. There are too many.” Ryker backs away from the creature until he is close enough to reach out and put one arm in front of me, herding me toward the parked cars and blocking my view of the creature at the same time. “I’ve got you. Trust me. We can make it to the car.”

“How many are out there?” I can’t help the fact that I sound pathetic and scared, even to myself. Of course, there are more. One or two wouldn’t be terrifying enough.

“Dunno. Come on!”

We make a break for it, Ryker keeping himself between me and the creature as we run toward the middle of the parking lot.

“Which one is yours?” I shout as I run as fast as I can, trying to keep up in my bare feet and floor-length dress.

“There!” We make it to his car in only a few more strides—a gorgeous silver Bentley that probably cost more than my parents could make in ten years. Holy shit.

Right. I forgot he’s loaded.

Totally irrelevant right now.

We get in the car and Ryker pulls out of the parking lot, wheels screeching in protest against the pavement.

The injured creature leaps in front of the car, blocking our path.

I scream.

Ryker accelerates.

The front of the car rams the creature, launching it into darkness. I lose sight where it fell between two other parked vehicles, as Ryker speeds away.

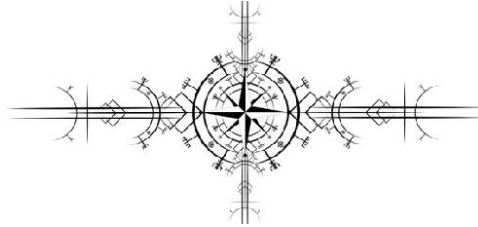
I look at the hood, expecting to see crumpled metal.

Nothing. The car's front end looks pristine and perfect, as far as I can tell. I sit back in stunned silence as he speeds away from the school building, the engine revving as he accelerates far faster than the posted speed limit. My dress is soaked through with his blood. I can feel it all over my hands and in my hair. Enough blood paints my body that he should be dead. I know there is even more blood on him.

“What the hell was that?”

His gaze darts to the rear-view mirror, and I don't like the frown on his face. “They're following us.”

ELEVEN



“Following us?” I twist in the passenger seat so I can look out the back window. I see nothing. “Ryker? What were those things?” I have a hundred questions, but that is the one I am most desperate to hear the answer to. They’ve haunted my dreams for years.

“A *draug*.”

“A *draug*?” I’m starting to think I need to be on stronger meds. A lot stronger. Like sit in a straitjacket all day and stare at the blank, white wall, stronger.

“That was a small one. A bigger one would have destroyed the car.” He turns a corner like we just robbed a bank and we’re being chased by a dozen police cruisers and a helicopter with one of those spotlight things.

“Bigger? Like the first one you killed?” My body slams into the door and I brace myself for the next turn. He’s not slowing down.

“Yes.”

“A *draug*?”

“Yes.”

“Come on, Ryker. That’s not even original.” Surely my delusional mind can come up with a sexier name than that recycled, Norse mythology bullshit. Come on, give me some *Darth Vader*? Or how about *Mind flayer*? So many interesting names and my brain chose this one? I mean, *come on*.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“What are you even talking about?”

He frowns at me. “You seriously don’t know?”

I throw my hands up in the air. If I knew I wouldn’t be so damn lost. “Obviously not!”

“Damn it.” He curses under his breath. “We call them the draug and they have hunted people like us for a long time.”

“Draug? Like the undead monsters in last year’s *Viking* game? Seriously?” There’s no way any of this is real. If it were real, the creature wouldn’t be, one—a hideous thing I’ve had nightmares about for as long as I can remember, and two—named after a zombie-like monster from a video game that every fourteen year-old-boy was obsessed with last year.

I put my face in my hands and sigh, a deep sigh, one I feel all the way to my bones. I am going to wake up inside a hospital, chained to a bed, thrashing and screaming at nothing. I have finally, totally, and completely lost touch with reality. Absolutely, without doubt, lost my fucking mind.

“The game took inspiration from Norse mythology.”

“I figured you would say something like that.” I played that popular Viking game. Everyone was talking about it, so I checked it out. It was okay. Not really my thing. I’m more into puzzle games. Either way, I don’t believe in mythology or magic or gods. None of it. And I might be nuts, but even I know the pixelated characters in video games aren’t real. And neither are their monsters.

He takes another corner so fast the car slides sideways before the tires catch and shoot the vehicle forward like a silver bullet. I slide across the seat and my hip slams into the console. That, and my seatbelt, are the only things keeping me out of Ryker’s lap.

“How fast are you going?”

He glances into the rear-view mirror, and I don’t like the worried furrow I see between his brows. “Not fast enough.”

I turn in my seat to look behind us again and see nothing but quiet streets and trees standing along the edges like

guardians. I always loved trees.

I face forward and stare at the bloodstains on my once beautiful dress. I rub my fingertips against the thick part of my palm, the smudges of dried blood act like glue, snagging the movement. “There’s nothing behind us.”

“There is. I have to get you out of here.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You don’t know what you are, do you?” He glances at me from the corner of his eye but doesn’t look long. Which is fine with me, as I don’t want to end up in a ditch. “I’ve known about this my entire life. But you?” He slams his palm down on the top of the steering wheel. “I can’t leave you here. You’ll be dead by morning.”

That. Is. It. I’ve had it with myself, with my dreamy, perfect boyfriend, and the cheesy dialogue straight out of a fantasy novel. Oh, Dani, you are special. You have special, magical powers. I am your sexy boyfriend, and I will fall madly in love with you at first sight and protect you until you can kick ass on your own. Because you just don’t know who you really are.

I made myself into my very storybook hero. God. I mean, I always wanted to be *Wonder Woman*, the new one—because, yeah, she is gorgeous and bad ass—but this is ridiculous, next level shit. Even for me.

“Pull over.”

“What?” Ryker turns to stare at me, but I don’t care if he’s watching the road any longer. None of this is real. I should have realized it the moment one of the monsters from my oldest nightmares decided to make an appearance. How many times have I dreamed about one of those things? Dozens? Hundreds of times? I don’t know, and my therapist told me to stop keeping count.

If I still had the old notebook, I’d draw an extra special gold star on this one. This nightmare is magnificent, actually. Much better than eight-year-old me could have ever imagined.

And... I read way too many books. Ryker is like the perfect vampire, werewolf, warrior—don't forget the training dream—super sexy, special, billionaire, gorgeous boyfriend all rolled into one. Although, he's not a secret royal. Guess I did leave something out. Hmm. I'll have to do better next time.

I reach for the door handle and pull. The door is locked, no resistance from the internal mechanism at all. Damn it. "Pull over. Right now."

"I can't." The amount of sincere worry in his tone is perfect, too. God I'm good.

"Why not?" I cross my arms over my chest and lean my head back against the headrest. This should be good. Right? Let's see what my very talented imagination can come up with.

"The draug are abominations, creatures neither alive nor dead, created for the sole purpose of hunting people like us. They spend their eternal existence waiting for us to slip up." Ryker lets out a dry, unamused laugh, his fingers tapping furiously on the steering wheel. "I fucked up. I touched you and... I lost control. I got so caught up in you, I forgot to shield my energy." He slams his hand on the steering wheel so hard it looks like it hurt. "Fuck! It's my fault that draug found us, that it attacked. I'm so sorry, Dani. It won't happen again. I promise."

Which part won't happen again? The monster or the touching? Because if this is my illusion, I really want more of the touching.

Wait, perfect boyfriend is so in love, so attracted to this amazing heroine, that he loses control of himself over a single kiss?

Ok. Not bad, me.

So, he said people like us? Oh, boy. I totally know where this is going. Do I ask anyway? Of course I do. "What do you mean by 'people like us'?" I ask softly, trying not to sound too disappointed. If it's a dream, it must end. And for some stupid

reason, even though I know he's not real, I don't want to give him up. "Well?"

I should be out of breath from our sprint to the car, but I'm not. I feel energized, not exhausted, like I could run a marathon.

One more point for dreamland.

Maybe he means we're both mentally ill, and we're currently experiencing a shared psychosis. I'd much rather deal with that than have scary, rotting, hellish monsters be real. I wring my hands together and then stop, realizing all I'm doing is rolling the blood into little balls, like tiny spit wads—without the sticky, half-dried spit. Ugh, so disgusting.

"I didn't want to...I thought we'd have more time." Ryker's voice is defeated in a way I've never heard him sound before, barely audible over the thundering of the engine.

"Didn't want to do what?" My body goes silent. I'm doing my best to not freak out any more than I already have, but my calm facade won't last for much longer. Now that I know I'm dreaming, I should be able to wake myself up. I don't. I don't want to leave him and go back to being a lonely outcast who can't get a date. He might not be real, but I don't have the self-discipline to let him go. Not yet.

"Force your hand. I wanted you to tell me the truth. But I guess you genuinely have no idea who you are."

"What truth? What are you talking about?"

"Ever since you saved me after the accident, I've been keeping an eye on you." He takes the ramp for the highway. No comment. It doesn't really matter where we are dream driving. "I needed to be sure."

Did he just admit to stalking me? Maybe getting in a car with him wasn't such a good idea after all. Now we're on a highway going at least double the speed limit, heading out of town. Great.

Stupid. Serial killer, slasher stupid.

Good thing this isn't real, I guess. Take notes for next time.

I sit in silence, waiting for him to continue. Eventually, he does, voice breaking with emotion. “Dani, when I got hit by the truck, I should have died.”

I turn and look at him, searching his face for answers. He is pale, his forehead lined with worry, and his eyes dart back and forth between the road ahead of us and the rearview mirror. His knuckles are white from holding the steering wheel in a vice-like grip.

He’s either a fantastic actor or he believes what he’s saying. I swallow down a lump of dread, waiting for him to continue.

Swing the phantom hammer. Hard. Shatter the dream like glass.

No. Not yet. I am a masochist, I know, but I want to know how this fantasy is going to play out.

“But I survived. And it wasn’t because of the paramedics or the doctors.” He reaches a hand across the center console and grabs mine. “It was because of you.”

Of course, he’d say that in my perfect dream world. “I thought we knew that already. You told me I stopped the bleeding.” I shift in my seat, pressing back against the leather. He’s holding my hand and it feels good. Right.

Swing the phantom hammer. Hard. Shatter the dream like glass.

No. No. No. He’s so... perfect.

“Dani, you did more than stop the bleeding. You healed me. Exactly like you did when I was bleeding out just now.” He pauses, trying to collect himself. “There was no coming back from those injuries. I should be dead. And I think, deep down, you know that, too.”

Images flash before my eyes like I’m replaying a video of the accident. Ryker’s mangled body laid out on the road, blood pooling around him.

My hands shake, and the muscles in my back tense up.

“So, what are you saying, Ryker? That I’m some sort of real-life comic book *superhero*? I can heal people by touch?” I make a face, trying to hide the fact that I’m more than a little disappointed by that idea. If I am giving myself a dreamland superpower, I want to fly, or have super strength. Something better than being a glorified doctor—which I would never, ever be. Blood grosses me out, but it’s not that. I can’t stand to see other people in pain. Especially kids. I can’t do it. Makes me puke, every time. “Are you saying I’m a healer? Like a magical healer?”

“Yes. You have saved me twice, Dani. I wasn’t sure before, but now I am.”

A healer? Seriously? Always the sidekick in the group, never the fighter. Ugh. Or the paladin? Even a barbarian would have been cool.

I shiver involuntarily as the automatic air-conditioning reminds me that I’m soaked in blood and tears. Or maybe it’s shock.

“So, what? I’m a witch? I have fairy blood?”

“No. I believe you are a legacy, a human descendent of *Eir*.”

He’s got to be kidding. And who the hell is *Eir*?

I slip my hand out of his grip, unnerved. He looks at me for a moment and sees the incredulous look on my face as I stare at him, eyes wide and eyebrows raised, in pure disbelief.

“You don’t believe me.”

“Oh, of course I do.” Why wouldn’t I? This is, after all, my dream. Good on me to come up with a mystical person I’ve never heard of. Or maybe I have. Was that one of the character names in the Norse mythology unit? Or one of the fantasy novels I love to read?

“Would you take the next exit, please? I’d like to go home now.” I would love nothing more than a warm shower, a steaming cup of Earl Grey tea, and a fuzzy blanket to wrap myself in.

Swing the phantom hammer. Hard. Shatter the dream like glass.

Leave him. Go back to reality where the only monsters are the imaginary ones inside my head.

They make pills for that.

Time to go.

I close my eyes and build the illusion. I see the hammer. I hold the image of this dream as a piece of brittle glass, swimming with colors.

Swing the phantom hammer. Hard.

Nothing happens.

I do it again.

Again.

The inside of the car is hot. Stuffy. I can't breathe in here. I can't think. Why isn't it working? I've been doing this for years. I swing the hammer. The glass shatters. I wake the fuck up.

"Take me home." If I can't wake up, I can at least feel like I'm in my own space. Safe. Shower. Tea. Blanket.

He hesitates so long before responding, I start to think he won't say anything at all. But then, he does. "I'm sorry. I can't do that."

"Ryker." I breathe through my nose slowly, trying to dampen the anger and panic rising in my chest. "Take. Me. Home."

Hammer. Hammer. Hammer. Wake up, Dani. Wake. Up!

Why can't I wake up?

What if this isn't a dream? What if it's real?

"Dani, please." Ryker reaches for my hand, but I pull it away before he can grab it. "I know it sounds crazy. But, please believe me, I would never do anything to hurt you. And I wouldn't lie about something so important."

His voice is lethally quiet, cracking with emotion, and his ice-blue eyes are locked onto me as if he is willing me to trust him. Believe him.

When he looks at me like that, when he says those things...

I want to believe him, but I'm not sure I can.

I turn my head to look out the driver's side window. I see a black, shadowy figure darting in and out of the trees along the highway.

Is that real?

It happens again, the flicker of movement so brief, I almost convince myself it was my imagination. "Ryker? Did you see that?"

I twist in my seat and lean my elbows over the center console to get a better look out Ryker's side of the car. Just then, three more figures launch out of the tree line and start running toward us—all humanoid, with limbs hanging out of all the wrong places, rot dripping from their skin.

"Ryker!" I hit his arm repeatedly, trying to get his attention, and pointing toward the monstrosities.

He glances over his shoulder and curses, accelerating. "Fuck. Fuck." His eyes dart between the road and the draug. He curses again when he sees they are gaining on us. Quickly. "It's okay, we're almost there. We can make it."

Almost where? Who is he trying to convince? Himself? I would be more inclined to believe him if his face wasn't twisted with panic.

Out of nowhere, a draug slams into my side of the car. Its weight sends us careening at high speeds across the highway. Ryker struggles to stop us from spinning out.

The draug buries long, claw-like fingernails from one hand in the door and slams its other fist into the glass right next to my head.

Cracks spread across the window, making it look like a snowflake, or a spiderweb.

“Don’t worry. It’s special glass. Won’t break.” The draug screams in frustration and buries the long claws of its feet deep into the car door, piercing all the way through the metal, the sharp edges so close to my bare calves I doubt I could fit my fist between them. I don’t want to imagine what those razor blades could do to bare flesh.

“Ryker!”

He curses and swerves as if trying to shake the monster off. No luck. The draug snarls and snaps its horrible rows of teeth at my face like it wants to bite off my head.

The creature slams its fist into the window again. Ryker was right. The glass bows in toward me, but it holds. The draug screeches as a second monster lands in a crouch on top of the hood.

“Fuck!” Ryker curses and swerves so fast my head is thrown back against the seat.

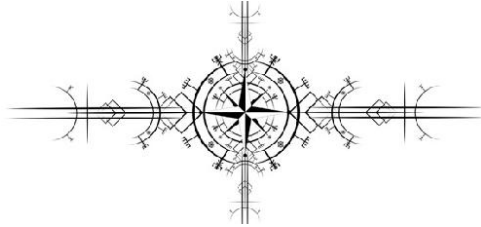
“Hold on!”

The draug on the hood of the car doesn’t seem to notice the change in direction. I stare, paralyzed with horror, as the thing’s black eyes move from object to object, from Ryker to me, studying the interior of the car. *Thinking.*

Its gaze settles on me, and I swear my blood turns to ice water in my veins as it reaches up to the top of the windshield and drives its claws through the roof of the car. Sharp, clawed fingers wrap over the top of the glass. Its fingers are *inside* the car.

Four rows of teeth show as the draug leans down, presses its dripping forehead flat on the glass, looks straight at me with at least six black eyes—not one in the right place—and fucking *smiles*.

TWELVE



Oh, my god. The draug is going to rip out the windshield and get inside the car.

I need a weapon. A knife. Something. *Anything.*

A horrible shriek erupts from the creature's mouth as it pulls back, uses its entire body to heave at our only protection.

"No, you don't." Ryker's words are quiet, but I don't hear fear or panic in his voice. I tear my gaze from the creature to see he is holding his dagger in one hand, steering the car with the other.

He lifts the blade and slides it across the top of the windshield like he's trimming cheese off the end of a sandwich. The creature's fingers make a disgusting sizzling noise as he cuts them off with one long slide of the blade. The clawed tips drop inside the vehicle with a disgusting series of plunking sounds when they hit the dash.

One bounces around and lands in my lap.

Gross.

I reach down to grab it, but Ryker stops me. "Don't touch it. The blade sealed the draug flesh, but if you open the wound again, its blood will burn your skin like acid."

"And I thought they couldn't get any more disgusting." I use the material of my skirt to flip the chunk of monster off my lap as Ryker throws the car to the side in a violent swerve.

The monster on the hood screams, its hands unable to hold on with only half of its fingers still attached.

Ryker swerves back in the opposite direction. The draug is flung to the side. It lands on the road in front of oncoming traffic with a howl that makes my heart skip a beat. I've never heard a monster sound so angry, not even in my worst nightmares did they ever sound like that. A car on the opposite side of the highway drives straight at the creature without hesitating, but the draug leaps over the car right before it gets hit.

"Why is nobody stopping?" If I were about to drive straight into a monster the size of a large horse, I would sure as hell be slamming on my brakes, but the oncoming traffic doesn't seem to be reacting at all.

"Mortals can't see the draug."

"Of course they can't." Why would they be able to? That wouldn't make sense, obviously.

The loss of its friend seems to enrage the creature attached to my side of the car. It screeches at me as it peels the metal off the outside of the door like I peeled the skin off the banana I ate this morning.

I screech, pressing my side against the center console and away from the raging draug determined to get into the car. "Just how intelligent are they?"

"They're smart enough. Especially when they have the help of their handlers."

The car keeps swerving back and forth across the road, but not fast enough to shake it off. I scream again, this time in horror when it flips its head around and attacks the window, desperately trying to get inside.

The creature's head glances off the glass. I try to catch my breath when I spot the rows and rows of black, rotted teeth that fill its gaping maw. It opens its mouth even wider, the shrill noise a hideous sound that vibrates inside my body. It lunges at the window again, and this time the glass splinters. Tiny cracking noises fill me with panic as the spider-webbing crack grows larger.

“Take it! Cut off its claws!” Ryker yells and holds his dagger out to me, but I can barely hear him over the sound of tearing metal and the draug’s bubbling, rotten, phlegm-filled screams on the other side of the window, just inches from my face.

I am frozen. I had forgotten about the claws so close to my leg.

“Dani! Take it! He’ll rip off your door!”

Shit. I wrap my hands around the ornate hilt and lean over to hack at the toes of the monster still clinging to my door.

I chop off its toes as Ryker does everything that he can to keep us straight on the road. The dagger’s blade cuts through the protruding draug parts like I’m using a warm knife on a block of butter. I hit bone, push, slide through to the next. There are only four more and before long they are all scattered on the floorboard in front of my seat. I lift my bare feet off the floor to avoid touching them, but the move steals most of my anchoring ability and my shoulder slams into the door as Ryker tries to shake the draug off now that it’s missing its toes. My cheek presses to the glass. The only thing separating me from the thing I just chopped up is transparent, breakable, and thinner than the heel of my abandoned stilettos. I push against the door frame and shove myself back toward the middle, Ryker’s dagger still in my hand and pointed at my car door’s window. I don’t think that glass is going to last much longer.

Two more run up on our left, keeping pace with the car, joining the fray. The car shudders and shakes under the weight of the draug as they jump on top of the roof. Their beating from above is like thunder inside a small space as they dent the metal down on top of us.

“Ryker!” My voice is frantic and shrill as I scream, clinging tightly to the leather seat. I don’t know how he can see anything through all the broken glass.

“Hold on!”

Suddenly, all three abominations roar in pain as they are ripped from the outside of the car, bones crunching and rot

squelching. The thud of their impact is loud. It's as if they were slammed into an invisible wall at high speed. The draug on my door flies off in an instant, too fast for me to register what's happening.

The seat belt digs into my chest as the car spins out. Tires squeal. The smell of burned rubber fills the inside of the car. My head is spinning even faster than the car. Bile rises in my throat.

Finally, the car comes to a rest. We're alive. The car is upright. I'll take that as a win even if I'm still so dizzy that I can't sit up straight. My body feels like it has hit a wall, and my ears are ringing so loudly I can't think. Or talk. I've never been this nauseous. Sick. Dizzy. I know this is the famous 'Fight or Flight' response, but I can't do either, so I sit still and try not to explode.

What. Just. Happened?

Not just the draug or the dagger I still hold in one hand. I mean all of it. One minute I'm on a dream date, kissing the most amazing guy I've ever met. The next? Nightmares come to life.

I glance over at the driver's side. Ryker is fumbling with his seatbelt, trying to unclasp the buckle and free himself. Blood runs down the right side of his face—his eyebrow is split. He must have hit his head on the steering wheel while we were spinning out.

“Dani... Dani!”

His voice is frantic as he reaches out for me. “Dani, say something. Are you ok?” He grabs my arm and nudges me, eyes crazed.

I blink twice, slowly, then swallow. My throat feels like it's lined with sandpaper. “I'm fine.” I'm not fine. At all.

I twist in my seat, trying to see behind us. “Where are they?”

“It's okay. We're safe now.”

No. No, we are not. Not until I see dead bodies of goo melting into the ground. “No.” I shake off his hand and tighten my grip on the dagger’s hilt. “It’s not safe. Trust me.” This is my nightmare, after all. I know exactly how this kind of bullshit goes. Classic horror movie moment, we think we’re safe and then? *Bam!* One of those things rips off the car door and grabs one of us, drags us off into the night as we are screaming for help that never comes.

I have to try to break out of the nightmare one more time. I don’t want to be here anymore. I can’t do this, not for another second. I close my eyes and build the image in my mind, turn this dream into a brittle mirror. Hold it, focus harder than I ever have, determined to end this before I’m forced to watch Ryker die. Again.

Swing the phantom hammer. Hard. Shatter the dream like glass.

“Dani?”

“Shhh.” I need to focus, which is nearly impossible even without him talking to me.

Swing the phantom hammer. Hard.

Harder.

Shit. Nothing is happening. My pulse is still a drum beating in my ears. Something made a fist inside my chest and it’s squeezing. Twisting. I can’t breathe. I can’t think. I need the air to go past the blockade in my throat.

“Dani, it’s okay. They can’t get to us here. I’ve got you. You’re safe.” Ryker reaches for me and pulls my head to his chest. The seatbelt pulls at me, but I ignore it, happily crushing my stomach with the middle console to be closer to him. His chin comes down on top of my hair and I feel his hand moving across my back, trying to comfort me. Thing is, it works. At least a little. I give up trying to end this stupid nightmare and just let him hold me. If I ignore the stench of blood, and those burned off fingertips with razor-sharp claws, I can get air moving in my lungs, which is an improvement over a minute ago.

What nonsense is he spewing? They can't get us here? Where the hell is here? Sorry to tell my dreamy, vampire, warrior boyfriend that those things have been in the majority of my nightmares for as long as I can remember. Doesn't matter where I am when I fall asleep. There is no here. They are everywhere I am.

Does this mean it's my fault he's hurt?

I sit up and look at him. He has so much blood everywhere, I can't tell what's new and what's from his first battle with those things. Except for the bright red smear across his brow. "Ryker, you're bleeding."

It's so much easier to focus on someone else right now than worry about why I can't break out of this nightmare, or where I'll be when I do.

I brace myself against the door and unbuckle my seatbelt. I reach for him, hand shaking, and slowly, gently, move my thumb across his split brow. He grimaces, trying to pull back, but I don't let him. A familiar feeling rises from my gut, a warmth that spreads from my chest, down my arms, and radiates from my thumb. I watch in awe as Ryker's skin threads itself back together.

It's amazing, but also really, really weird. But as far as dreams go, this part of it isn't so bad.

Ryker lifts his hand to his eyebrow and feels the uninjured skin. "Thanks."

Our gazes lock and emotions chase one another around inside me, all urgent, all strong, all demanding attention. Relief that he's still alive. Rage at the things that attacked us. Longing. There are more, but mostly there is want. Since the moment he kissed me, really kissed me, I can't look at him without craving him, greedy for more. The need to touch him, and be touched, is like a living, breathing hunger devouring me from within. I've never felt like this. Ever. Not from watching videos, or reading books, or exploring my own body. Not even when imagining what it might be like to fall in love someday.

“Don’t look at me like that.” He traces my bottom lip with his thumb, then leans over quickly and presses a sloppy kiss to my cheek. “We need to go.”

My cheeks are ablaze. How is it possible to want to make out with him when we are covered in gore, were just chased by monsters, and I’m still scared? If this is real, I’m screwed. If it’s not, I’m screwed. Either way, I don’t see a win in here for me.

I reach over and try to shove the passenger door open. The warped metal doesn’t budge. Ryker opens his door, climbs out and reaches a hand back in to help me crawl out his side of the car. Hand in his, I step out with shaky legs, opposite hand still locked around the hilt of his dagger, and look around.

The first thing I notice is that the car looks like something you’d see in a news report about war in another country. Dented hood and roof, tires still smoking, glass cracked. There are holes where the draug’s fingers were embedded above the windshield. They look remarkably like bullet holes. How did Ryker manage to drive that mess?

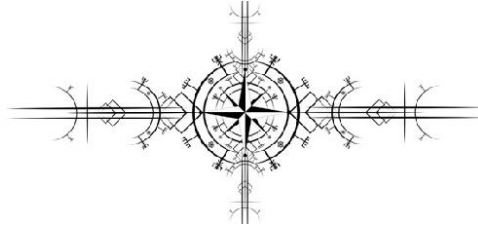
“Come on. We’re almost there.” Ryker tugs on my hand and I turn to walk with him. Where, I don’t know, until I realize we are walking the last few steps of a long drive that ends in a parking lot almost as big as the one at my school.

“Where are we?” Willing to give up neither the dagger nor Ryker’s hand, I use my dagger wielding hand to pick up the front hem of my skirt. The ridiculousness of the situation almost makes me laugh. I’m sure I look like the bride of *Frankenstein* right now, covered in blood. But the move isn’t about looks, it’s about not falling flat on my face.

Small rocks and gravel dig into the bottoms of my feet as we walk. I wince but keep going. After what we just went through, I can deal with some rocks.

“Ryker, where the hell have you been with my car?” A man’s voice, an angry man’s voice, carries through the night. Ryker’s hand tenses in mine. He pulls me a bit behind him, blocking my view of whoever is speaking, or maybe, blocking their view of me.

THIRTEEN



“I’m sorry, Mr. Astavar. I’ll replace it.”

“I don’t want a replacement. I want an explanation.” Mr. Astavar’s tone has not grown friendlier, but Ryker doesn’t seem to be affected. Not much I can do but keep my mouth shut and wait this out.

“We were attacked by draug.” Ryker’s tone holds none of the remorse I expect to hear, nor what I would feel if my father were talking to me in that tone, the you-have-severely-disappointed-me tone.

“How many?” A female voice, not young, more like an angry mother, and all business.

“Two in town. I killed one. At least four on the road here.”

“Ryker! Are you insane?” This voice is female as well, but young and...hurt?

I step close to Ryker but refuse to hide for another moment. I move to stand next to him, our fingers woven together in a bond I have no desire to break. I look up to discover at least ten people staring at us. I don’t recognize any of them. They all glare as Ryker and I walk closer. We don’t stop until we stand directly in front of them.

A group of five women, all decked out in identical battle uniforms, hair pulled back in complicated braids, are fanned out around the central figure like spokes on a wheel. Their clothes are a mix of gold-plated, medieval armor and modern protective gear and fabrics. Their armor bears a raven insignia

in the center, above their breasts, just below the collarbone. They all look so badass I could stare at them for hours.

In the center is a middle-aged man with rusty red, wavy hair sprinkled with gray. He seems out of place in casual business attire, but he looks furious. A young woman, around my age, with fiery red hair, stands at his side and glares daggers at me, ignoring Ryker completely. Next to her is a guy I recognize as Ryker's blonde friend from my dream—Zelik. His eyes are wide as he takes it all in, me in my once luminescent gown, now stained red, and Ryker in his torn suit, saturated with his own blood. His gaze locks onto our joined hands, then darts up to inspect me with an incredulous look on his face. Zelik's skin is much paler than in my dream, as if he's in so much shock every drop of blood has drained from his face. I stare right back. Zelik grins at me—just barely lifting one corner of his mouth—before turning his attention to his friend.

“You good, Ry?” He greets Ryker with a nod and Ryker nods back.

“We're good.” Ryker squeezes my hand as if willing his announcement to be true.

Not *I'm* good. *We're* good. A silly part of me is thrilled at his choice of words.

The red-haired gentleman, and the younger girl next to him—looks like she's about my age, and probably his daughter, based on coloring and bone structure—are far from sharing my small enjoyment.

“If you are unharmed, why are you covered in blood?” One of the armored women crosses her arms and glares as she inspects both of us from head to toe. I doubt she misses much. When her gaze lingers on the dagger I'm clenching in my hand, even though it's mostly hidden in the folds of my skirt, I know I'm right. I am putting her squarely in the not-to-be-messed-with column.

“I'll explain later. Right now—” Ryker's response is cut short by a series of loud screams, their distinct pitch one I recognize far too easily. The draug aren't far away, and they

are screeching with what sounds, to me, like bone-chilling rage.

I tense, poised to turn, but Ryker squeezes my hand and shakes his head. “No. It’s okay. Don’t look.” He makes the suggestion as if he truly believes he is sparing me further horror.

I wish. I clutch his hand tight and press my cheek to his shoulder, just for a moment. I don’t like the guilt and worry I see in his eyes, as if he’s blaming himself for ruining the night, our date... my life. Definitely not his fault.

“It’s okay. I’ve seen them before.”

“What? What does she mean by that?” The young girl, who is, in my completely unjealous opinion, far too interested in Ryker, sounds like she wants to rip my hair out.

“I mean, I’ve seen them before.” I glare at her just long enough to let her know I’m not going to let her walk all over me. Then I glance up at the hottest guy I’ve ever met and hold out his dagger. He takes it, presses some kid of invisible button, and I watch, intrigued, as the blade retracts into the hilt until all that’s left is a strange looking golden scepter thing with an innocent looking round tip on one end, and a pointed ribbon-like tip on the other. It’s like someone took half of a track relay team’s baton and twisted it into something that looks like medieval art. He slips the weapon back into one of the inside pockets of his suit jacket—or what’s left of it.

“You need to clean that, Ry.” Zelik walks forward and holds out his hand. “Hand it over. I know you. You won’t get all the blood.”

Ryker grins, pulls the weapon from his jacket and gives it to his friend. “Thanks.”

“Mr. Magnisen, you are dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.” Zelik lowers his head but shoots Ryker a look from the corner of his eye that clearly means we’ll talk later. He walks away, disappearing inside a large building I haven’t paid any attention to.

Why is everyone standing around chatting when those things are still here? I turn when I hear pounding against what must be an invisible barrier about thirty meters away. Each time one of the draug bounces against the invisible wall, a blue ring expands through the air from the point where they struck, and a deep, thundering sound resonates through the parking lot.

Mr. Astavar clears his throat and I look over my shoulder to find him scowling at me with his arms crossed. I decide he must be the one in charge here because no one is doing anything, and they are all looking at him.

“Octavia, send word to Jarl Heimdalsen as well as Jarl Hlinsen. We need the barrier reinforced as soon as possible.”

“Yes, father.” The girl who hates me—Octavia—follows Zelik’s path and enters the same shadowy building.

Hah! Score one for me. I knew they were related. The man in charge speaks again.

“Mirre, get rid of them.”

“Yes, Mr. Astavar.” Mirre, or she-who-shall-not-be-messed-with, the woman that I assume is the leader of the warrior group, answers. She lifts her arm in the air, making a set of hand gestures toward the screeching draug.

Like a well-oiled machine, the women walk toward the barrier in a precise, triangular formation.

They move as one, Mirre at the front, inching closer and closer to the monsters. I wonder how they plan on dealing with the howling creatures—they have no weapons that I can see. Even though they are clearly highly trained as a unit, and well-equipped in the armor department, I fear for them. They are marching head-on into the fray with nothing to defend themselves.

Then, Mirre shouts another command. I’m not sure what language it’s in, but it sounds nothing like English. Something about the word strikes true, ringing through my blood like the resonance of a cymbal strike.

Faster than I can blink, all the women are armed, each weapon glowing with an ethereal light. One, a woman in her mid-thirties with black hair, wields a bow that I know in my heart will rarely miss. Another carries a great sword in both hands, muscles working expertly to control the blade. Some of the warriors carry both spears and shields. Those women take positions flanking the front of the group, protecting them on the outside.

Mirre is carrying a spear with blades on either end, long, sharp-looking blades. As she approaches the monsters, she swings it with control and finesse, wielding it with the grace and skill of a warrior I didn't believe existed outside of fantasy novels or my favorite *Lord of the Rings* movie.

The rest of the women take the cue and launch their assault. I am mesmerized by the precision with which they work in unison, the way they complement and balance one another. I can't peel my eyes away from their movements, in complete awe.

They take down the first draug with stunning efficiency and speed. The glob of snarling teeth and claws—and four legs sticking out of its sides, I kid you not—hits the ground with a dull thud. As they finish it off, an eerie blue light flickers from its eyes and whispers out of its mouth. The women leave it behind to attack the next, but I watch as the body bubbles and melts away, sinking into the ground like sludge going down a drain.

I could watch these women fight for hours. They are amazing. Insane. Off the rails like nothing I've ever seen before. Unfortunately, my trance is broken when Mr. Astavar attacks Ryker and I with his words. "What the hell were you thinking, Forsetta?"

I glance over to Ryker who, instead of groveling like I would have expected, cocks his head and stares daringly at Mr. Astavar. Judging by the bulging veins on the side of Astavar's temples, Ryker's silence enrages the man further.

"Sneaking off school grounds, stealing my car, returning with draug in tow? You risked your life, left the grounds

without protection, and return covered with blood? And if all that wasn't enough cause for me to notify your mother, you bring a mortal back to campus!" His lips twist in a condescending sneer as he looks at me like I'm lower than a cockroach, in his esteemed opinion. "And all for what? A girl? Have you no shame? The legacies here are the best of our people. You, young man, need to maintain certain...standards. You will not be allowed to do," he waves his hand in my direction like I'm even lower than a cockroach, not human, like I'm literally shit on his shoe and he can't wait to scrape me off, "this. You know better."

Okay. Well. Fuck this guy. I'm not even surprised that Ryker "borrowed" his car—although Zelik's words in my dream make more sense now. Not that I usually endorse theft of any kind. This is just a special exception.

Ryker grinds his teeth together and takes a step forward. "Watch your mouth, Astavar. You will not insult Dani." Ryker spits the man's name out like it tastes foul. "You forget your place."

Mr. Astavar's eyes are so dark they appear almost black, and are filled with a cold, dark fury. The two remaining adults standing next to him, his assistants, I assume, exchange concerned glances, obviously nervous about the growing tension.

I expect the conflict to escalate. No one talks to an authority figure that way and doesn't get their ass chewed, but, to my surprise, Astavar takes one step back and bows shallowly at the waist. "My apologies... Your Highness." Each word sounds forced and unnatural, and he holds onto every syllable as though it pains him to speak.

Your Highness?

Is this a joke? He's royal?

Bravo, me. Bravo.

Every single stereotype has now been accounted for in this little fantasy of mine. They should give out medals for this.

Mr. Astavar shakes his head. “Get inside, both of you. Get her cleaned up. You are both to report to the council chamber in one hour.”

Water hot enough to make my skin flush runs down my body. It stings as it hits my neck and shoulders and washes the dried blood and mud from my skin. The contaminated water makes its way down to the shower tiles and slips down the drain. I roll my neck and massage my shoulders, working knots out of my muscles, painfully tight knots that magically appeared over the last couple of hours. Rose-scented body wash and jasmine shampoo saturate the steam with calming fragrances, and I breathe them deep into my lungs.

The empty dorm room Ryker brings me to is both a sanctuary and prison. One of the warrior women is standing just outside the door. I have been instructed to shower and make myself presentable so I can report to the Chamber. Whatever that means. They aren't my bureaucrats, so I don't care all that much, but I don't want to look like a monster, or panic my parents when Ryker takes me home, even if this is all a dream.

I search the room for my phone until I remember I dropped it sometime during the prom chaos. I need to find a way to message or call Ava. She's probably worried sick. Although, she might have assumed I left with Ryker so we could fool around.

Or she might be too busy fooling around with Nicole to even notice I'm gone.

I run my fingers through the tangled strands of my hair, massaging to remove Ryker's dried blood from my scalp, and working the second round of shampoo into a lather atop my head. Washing my hair once wasn't enough to get all the gross out of it. I tilt my head back under the showerhead, letting the

water run through my hair. The soapy, bloody mess pools around my feet. Good lord.

I shake my head and bite my lip. Another round of shampoo it is. I reach over to the bottle Ryker handed me before he left. I squirt a generous glob of the syrupy liquid into my palm and work it into my hair.

It's hard to believe I'm at Forsetta Academy, washing copious amounts of blood off my body because I saved a super-hot prince from monsters that, apparently, might not be hallucinations.

When the water runs clear and my skin is pruney from the moisture, I turn off the shower, the handle squeaking in resistance. I fumble around for a minute, reaching for the towel I left on the side of the sink, and dry myself off. Wrapping the thick cotton around my body, I step out of the protective embrace of the warm space and rinse my mouth with the mouthwash left on the bathroom sink. The steam has fogged up the mirror, so I wipe it away with the side of my hand. My hair is sopping wet and frames my tired face and dull eyes. Damn, I guess I look as overwhelmed and exhausted as I feel. At least I'm not covered in Ryker's blood anymore.

And it was his blood. He should be dead. Somehow, he's not. Even more insane? Somehow, I'm responsible. I have healing powers? I must. I saved Ryker's life. Twice.

I unlock the bathroom door and step out into the warm lighting of the dorm room. I stop in my tracks when I see Ryker, frozen, standing next to the undecorated desk in the corner of the room.

My cheeks flame instantly as I meet his gaze and my heart does a funny little flip in my chest. I am hyper-aware of the fact that I am totally naked beneath the towel.

And Ryker...he looks amazing. He's dressed in a clean, dark gray t-shirt and faded jeans, fresh from his own shower. His hair is wet and hangs in waves, and he's clutching a bundle of clothes in his hands that looks like it's for me. I don't normally go for pink, but beggars can't be choosers.

His eyes scan me up and down, taking everything in before settling on mine again. He clears his throat and shifts his gaze away from my body. “I brought you some clean clothes. I figured they might be more comfortable than your own right now.” He places the bundle of clean clothing on the wooden desk, his cheeks bright pink. “Sorry, I thought I could—I didn’t know... I’m gonna go.”

He walks toward the door, head down, but I stop him with a hand on his wrist. “Ryker...” I swallow hard, my throat tightening with emotions. I take a hesitant step toward him. The air between us is thick, but I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to act. I want to reach out and touch him. I want so badly for him to wrap his arms around me and make the last hour fade away. Being alone with a boy would normally make me too nervous to speak. But being with him feels so right. Simple. Easy.

I want to burrow into his arms and pretend everything is okay. Instead, all I can manage is a nervous smile as our eyes meet again. “Thanks.”

I watch him intently as his eyes burn right through me. My heart races as I move toward him. I ache to kiss him.

His muscles tense under his freshly laundered t-shirt and he takes a step back. “Dani... we can’t.”

Pour an ice-cold bucket of water over me, why don’t you? I want to be cool and composed, but after the night I’ve had, I don’t have it in me. Instead, I blurt out my insecurity like an idiot. “You don’t want to kiss me?”

“I don’t want to? No. Trust me. I want to.”

My breath catches in my throat at the raw desire I hear in his voice.

“You’re in front of me, looking gorgeous, in nothing but a towel. If we start... one kiss won’t be enough.”

My cheeks burn and I tear my gaze from the heat in his eyes, look somewhere much safer, the floor. “Maybe you should go.”

Ryker nods and turns toward the door. His hand rests on the doorknob as he pauses for a moment and looks back at me with a fire in his eyes that's difficult to ignore.

The thought of dropping the towel and doing something really stupid sends sparks down my spine. I don't. Of course I don't. I'm scared, nervous, and I've only really been kissed once. By him. I'm not ready for more than that, no matter how insistently my horny teenage body demands otherwise.

"Dress quickly. It's time to go."

"Talk to your council?"

"Yes."

"Why do I need to be there? Can't you take me home first, and then go talk to them? I'm sure my parents are worried by now. I lost my phone, so I haven't even messaged them. I really need to go home." I hope someone honest found my clutch on the gym floor and turned it in to lost-and-found. If not, I'd be explaining to my parents how I lost another cell phone. Damn it.

"I'm sorry. I can't." He takes a deep breath and releases it through tight lips, like he's trying to gather up all his willpower. For what, I'm not sure.

"Didn't the fight squad kill the rest of the draug that attacked us?"

"Yes. They have been dealt with."

"Then why not take me home?"

"You need to speak with the Chamber members."

"Why?"

"They're your people now, too." He takes one last look at me before stepping out into the hallway. The door closes without a sound behind him.

I glare at the pile of pink—Ava would freaking love it—and clench my teeth to hold in a scream of frustration.

My people? Please, give me a break. I don't know who they are, and I don't care. They aren't my anything.

Why can't this nightmare be over already?

"This dream is getting old, Dani." I know I'm talking to myself, but it's my only option, since no one else is in the room to appreciate my rant.

I stand perfectly still. Water from my wet hair drips and slides down my shoulders to disappear in the towel. I close my eyes and build the illusion one more time. Turn this reality into a piece of glass, like a mirror. Hold the thought. Focus on it. Hold it.

Swing the phantom hammer. Hard. Shatter the dream like glass.

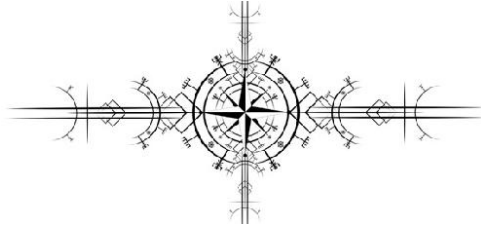
I swing. And swing. I pound that fucking hammer into my imaginary glass mirror over and over. Nothing happens. I mean, I've dreamed entire movie sequences before, stories so complete, from beginning to end, they could be written into novels. But this? This is ridiculous.

So why am I still here?

Maybe it's because I don't want to leave him. Also ridiculous, especially if he's a figment of my overactive, hallucination inducing, create a dream boyfriend, imagination.

Shit.

FOURTEEN



‘Pretty in pink’ should not be a saying. It really shouldn’t.

The jeans I’m wearing are soft and stretchy, if a little too long. I’m guessing the neon green, plastic shoes on my feet are normally used by one of the girls here when they shower. The bright pink hoodie, cotton-candy pink with a stupid smiley face in the center, is not my style. But since everything I was wearing, stick-on, strapless bra included, is literally in the trash can next to the toilet in the bathroom, I can’t complain.

At least the fabric is thick enough, and loose enough, that I don’t feel like I’m putting my wild and free girls on display.

A soft knock on the door. It’s Ryker. “Dani? Are you ready?”

No.

“Yes.” I join him in the hall, irritated all the more when he looks me over, head to toe, and a big, goofy smile lights up his face.

“Nice outfit.”

“Shut up.”

His laughter shouldn’t make me feel like everything is right in the world, but somehow, it does. “I’m sorry. I asked Octavia to get you something to wear.”

Ah, the red-haired, she-devil who is clearly interested in Ryker for herself. No wonder I look like a cartoon character. “And she wanted me to look like an idiot?”

He leans in close and kisses me, just like that. I'm frozen, unwilling to move away, until he pulls back, his forehead resting against mine. "Well, the joke's on her, because you look beautiful."

I say nothing, stubborn in my silence. At this point, I'm just trying to breathe and calm down enough to think. I just need to think. "Ryker, why does your council want to talk to me?"

"Haven't you always felt like there was something different about you? Something that didn't fit in with everyone else?"

"Are you serious?" I let out a dry laugh and roll my eyes as I tilt my head back. All sense of humor fades when his gaze locks on mine.

Ryker is looking at me like he wants to see inside my soul and pull some deep, unknown truth from the depths of my being.

There isn't one. As far as I can tell, I'm pretty much average in every single category. Smarts. Grades. Looks. Height. Weight. Lack of fashion sense and a serious lack of talent with make-up. The only thing extraordinary about me is the long list of psychiatric diagnoses in my medical records. That is the only thing that makes me different. Hallucinations that make me scream with terror. Draug and other terrors haunting me, both waking and asleep. Am I different? Yes, I am. But not in the cool-kid kind of way I know he is implying. Which reinforces my conviction that this is all happening inside my head. A dream within a dream, if you will.

Maybe I can't wake up because I don't want to give up the look in his eyes. No real guy has ever looked at me like this. Our faces are so close we are sharing air. His heat calls to me and I want to lean into him and ask him to hold me until everything makes sense.

Instead, nothing makes sense to me right now. Nothing. The powerful, focused attention in Ryker's eyes is straight-up romance movie intense. In other words, not real. It's as if my subconscious took every fantasy I had and shoved it all into

this one, passionate drama. Unfortunately for me, this adventure is unfolding more and more like a tragedy than a love story. Being here is starting to hurt in a way that is far beyond the physical, taking everything lacking in my life and holding it up to a magnifying glass. “I really need to go home.”

“You can’t. It’s not safe. There are more draug out there. They’ll be looking for you now.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re one of us.”

“What does that even mean?” I’m not one of them, whoever they are. I’ve never been one of them. I’m not rich. I’m not royal. My parents don’t drive a Bentley. Before today, I’d never even seen one with my own two eyes. I don’t belong here.

“It means you’ve grown up without knowing who you are, alone, with no one to help you figure out what you’re capable of. I can’t imagine how isolated, abandoned, and overwhelmed you’ve felt.”

Well, he’s got one thing right. Being ostracized has kind of been my thing. Although, not for the reason he thinks. I wish I was made fun of for my awesome healing powers instead of morbid, death-filled hallucinations. Every other kid at school knows who I am. Every year. And so do their parents. Teachers I’ve never had a class with watch me walk the halls with pity in their eyes, if they dare make eye contact in the first place. Which is rare. All this attention now is making my gut twist into knots. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but I’m not one of you. I promise you, I’m not.”

“You healed me, Dani. Twice. If you aren’t one of us, how did that happen?”

“I don’t know.” It’s true. I can’t explain how Ryker had a huge gaping wound in his torso one minute and was fine the next. Or how he was hit by a truck, bled all over the place, but lived to tell the tale.

I suppose having magic healing powers is not completely off the table. At least as far as this alternate reality goes. But if none of this is real, why does it feel so vivid and lifelike?

I lean forward, resting my head on his chest, shoulders slumped, and confused beyond all belief. What. Is. Happening?

He places his warm palm on my back and makes long, circular motions up and down, both soothing and reassuring me.

I let out an audible sigh. God, that feels good. Something about his touch makes my stress evaporate a little more with every pass of his hand over my back.

I finally collect my thoughts enough to speak, my cheek pressed to his chest, my ear over his steady heartbeat. “Okay...so what does any of this have to do with you not taking me home? Why would your monsters come after me? I’ve been living my life for eighteen years just fine. If they were after me, I think they would’ve found me by now.”

“Draug hunt legacies. That’s what I am, what I believe you are, too. Now that they know who you are, they won’t stop until they kill you.”

Oh, great. But what is a legacy? Before I can ask, Ryker says more.

“Honestly, with how powerful you are, I’m surprised they hadn’t found you yet. All it took was one fuck-up from me, and they were like moths to a flame.” Ryker wraps both arms around me, holding me tightly. He lifts one hand to gently massage the back of my neck. “I’m so sorry. They could’ve killed you, and it would have been my fault. If anything happened to you, I would never forgive myself.”

Can I melt, please? This guy is lethal, like irresistible. Dangerous.

Maybe he is a vampire, and he’s using Jedi mind-tricks on me. “What do you mean one fuck-up? What did you do?”

He hesitates before answering, collecting his thoughts. “All legacies have a certain energy signature that attracts the

draug. When we don't hide that energy, they can sense it from miles away. Usually, I don't have a problem with doing that, but when we were...uh...y'know..."

I tilt my head up to look at him, warmed by the guilty tone of his voice. Ryker glances down at me, eyes full of desire, obviously remembering our heated make-out session. "I forgot where I was. I let my concentration slip. My energy flared up, turning into a giant neon sign that screamed 'Hey! Juicy legacies for eating over here!'"

"Oh... they eat you?" Terrifying.

"Eat is not quite right, more like absorb. Did you see the extra parts sticking out of them? Arms and legs? The extra rows of teeth?"

Oh. My. God. "Those are parts from other people?"

"Yeah. The draug start out mostly human looking. The more they kill, the bigger they become."

So, he's not letting me go home because he believes I have this legacy energy and the draug will want to absorb me into their bodies for extra parts? Gross. I'm glad he doesn't want me to die. Makes sense, I guess, if he truly believes what he's saying. I'm still not convinced this is all fact and not an elaborate fiction courtesy of my questionable mental health. My disbelief in reality isn't his fault. I just don't have much faith in my own judgment since I've been hallucinating my whole life.

For the sake of argument, what if this is real?

Draug are real.

Ryker is real.

This obnoxious, bright pink hoodie and hideous, green shower shoes are real.

The soft press of my breasts against his warm chest is... real.

Oh shit. If this is actually happening, if I am one of his legacy people, that would mean my parents are, too. At least one of them. Right?

I step out of his arms and fight for calm. “What about my parents? If those things are hunting me, won’t they be able to track my...energy trail, or whatever...to my house? Won’t they try to eat my parents?”

“No, your parents are mortals. The draug don’t attack mortals. If you’re not home, they won’t have a reason to attack.”

“But isn’t being a legacy a genetic thing? Won’t my parents also be legacies?”

“Uh, yes, it is genetic.”

“Well?” I want to smack him into gear. “We have to go. Those things could be at my house right now.”

“Dani—”

“Come on!” I grab his hand and tug, but he plants his feet, unmoving. “What are you doing?”

“Your parents are mortal. I’m one-hundred percent sure.”

His words stop me in my tracks. “How is that possible? How would you know? I met you at the school tonight. You don’t even know where I live.”

“I do. My ravens have been tracking your parents as well.”

“What? You’ve been stalking my parents?” That is, somehow, even creepier than knowing he has been following me. I pull away, but he reaches for me. One of his hands wraps around my wrist, holding me in place.

“I had to make sure they were safe. Please. Listen. I’ve been keeping an eye on them, too, since the accident, since I began to suspect what you are.”

“You know that’s creepy, right?”

Ryker bites his bottom lip, lost in thought, and completely ignores my question. “Is there any chance you’re adopted?”

Adopted?

I shake my head vigorously. “No, no way.”

Ryker glances at me sympathetically, and opens his mouth to push me on it, but I cut him off.

“I am not adopted.” I look way too much like my dad to be adopted, and I’ve got my mom’s nose. Plus, there’s a whole baby book on a bookshelf in our basement somewhere, filled with pictures of my mom’s ultrasounds and pregnancy progress journals. There’s even a video of my birth. They tried to make me watch it. No freaking way. Gross. But I did give in and watch over Mom’s shoulder when she and my dad ooh’d and ahhh’d over their new baby girl.

That baby was very obviously me. My facial features were there from day one. I wasn’t one of those chubby babies that shoots out the va-jay-jay looking cute. No. I looked like an eighty-year-old version of myself, bald, wrinkled and in doll-sized miniature. Not that I wasn’t cute, in the ‘so ugly it’s cute’ kind of way.

Like a pug. Or a shar-pei puppy.

Ryker must mistake my silence for anger because he tries to calm me. “I know it’s a lot to take in.”

“I’m not adopted. I know who my parents are.”

“Dani—”

I put my hand up to stop him. “We can argue about it later. Okay? What I want to know is, why didn’t you just tell me when you realized I didn’t know? Why the circus act? The raven in the park? Prom?”

He takes my hand free from mid-air and presses it flat to his chest. “I wanted to get to know you before...”

“Before what? I figured out you were a psycho stalker?”

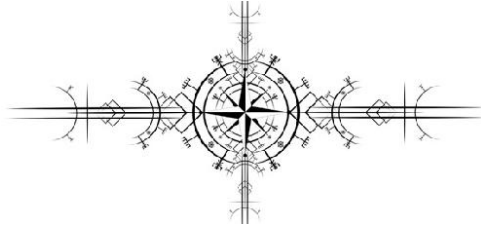
He has the nerve to chuckle, which—damn it anyway—totally steals the anger I’d been working up. “No. Before everything changed. Before you found out who I am. Who you are. Before the politics and the bullshit started.”

“What politics?”

He sighs, the sound somehow sad and full of resignation, like we’re about to go stand in front of a firing squad and

there's nothing he can do about it. "You'll see. We really need to go. They're waiting."

FIFTEEN



I walk with Ryker out of the dorm the same way I was led inside. We move quietly past a row of closed doors, along an oddly sterile hall, down a flight of steps that look like they're made of marble or some other expensive rock, and outside into the night. It's still dark. Hushed. I don't even hear any crickets.

I glance in the direction of the wrecked car, but it's gone. The evidence of the attack has already been removed. I look for signs of draug, or Mirre and her fighters.

There's nothing. It's as if nothing happened at all. No monsters. No car chase. If the force field, or whatever it was, is still there, I can't see it.

"Ry!" Zelik calls out and jogs over to us. I have no idea where he came from. He holds out the strange, golden, dagger-producing handle and a small backpack. "Here. Good as new."

Ryker takes both items from him, swings the bag over his shoulder and stashes the shining gold object in his pocket, pointy side out. I assume that's so it doesn't poke his more delicate areas. "Thanks."

"No problem." Zel looks at me before falling into step on Ryker's opposite side so he can walk with us. "Ry...I saw those clothes. What the fuck happened?"

"It's uh..." Ryker turns his head to look me over, evaluating me and my new outfit. His lopsided grin makes a brief appearance. Even when I look like a cartoon character, he likes what he sees.

I try—and fail—to keep my cheeks from burning.

“It’s complicated.”

We stroll, the stone and grass path silent under our feet. Obviously, Ryker isn’t in a big hurry to get where we are going, and the respite is a nice change of speed for my racing mind. The crescent moon is high in the sky, its rays lighting the stone path. I wonder if the after-prom has started yet. I hope Ava isn’t worried sick about me. Or my parents, although they aren’t expecting me home for a few more hours. I’ll have to borrow someone’s phone and shoot Ava a text to let her know I’m okay.

At least, I’m seventy percent sure I’m okay.

Octavia, a permanent scowl on her face, appears on the path in front of us like she stepped directly out of a shadow. I don’t want to be impressed at her ninja level sneaking skills, but I am. She’s wearing dark jeans, the latest shoes and a thin white sweater that looks like cashmere. The fuzzy goodness hugs her torso, displays her thin waist and larger chest to perfection. She looks amazing, damn it. “If it’s really that complicated, you better talk fast so you can tell us everything before we get inside.”

Her gaze dips down to look at our interlaced fingers. I watch with inner glee as her eyes harden and her jaw clenches. Score one for me. I get the distinct impression she doesn’t like Ryker being so... friendly toward me. Well, I don’t like her much either, so the feeling is mutual.

“I’m sorry, O. I couldn’t tell you.”

“Bullshit. You wanted to gallivant around with your new —” She looks me over one more time. Her attention focuses on the neon green shower shoes, and I swear I see a grin flash across her lips. “Friend.”

Is she his girlfriend or something? He’s holding my hand, not hers, so probably not, and I don’t think he’s the type who would disrespect his girlfriend by being seen publicly cheating with another girl, so, not his girlfriend, but seems like she wants to be.

“Careful. You aren’t my ravenborn yet. You don’t get to tell me what I can or can’t do, or who I can spend time with.” Ryker speaks with a seriousness I’ve never heard before.

“What’s a ravenborn?” I just assumed she was a legacy, like Ryker and, well, supposedly me.

She sighs through her nose and tilts her head back as though I’m testing her patience. “You mortals really are clueless.”

Ryker cuts in with a glare in Octavia’s direction. “They’re like our protectors. They are the descendants of the original Valkyries. Although their powers don’t fully awaken until they are bound to a legacy.”

“Oh.” I *really* don’t like the sound of that. Octavia is supposed to be Ryker’s ravenborn? She’s going to be *bound* to him? What the hell does that mean? I’m not usually a jealous person, but the twisting sensation in my stomach won’t go away.

Octavia joins our little procession as Ryker leads me toward the largest building. It looks more like a formal residence than a school building. The three-story mansion isn’t anything like old castle style. No, to my surprise, it looks so modern, it is almost futuristic. The mansion is a collection of massive pieces of glass, black steel, and white stone, with occasional wooden accents. A wide set of white stone steps leads up to black double doors that look like solid metal and are at least twice my height.

As we draw near, I see intricate carvings mixed with detailed scenes protruding from the metal. And everywhere, top to bottom, ravens. There must be hundreds of them in the design, along with winged beings in armor that look like archangels, flying and engaged in battle. In the center, so large it covers the middle with a giant circle, half on each door, is something that looks oddly like eight spokes on a wheel. There is a small circle at the center, and forklike projections at the ends of each line that don’t quite reach the outside edge. Two floodlights stand on poles at the top of the stairs, both focusing their light on the design like it’s the star of a Broadway

musical. The weird wheel thing doesn't look like anything I've ever seen.

“What's that?” I ask.

“It's a Nordic compass. Called a Vegvisir.” Ryker's tone is so matter of fact and bored sounding, I don't bother to ask about the angels. Not important right now. Really not important.

Still, it's unique and interesting. A compass. Not as mystical or mysterious as it looks, but still, it makes sense for a school. And this is a school campus. The more I look around, the more things I notice. The mansion is situated along the edge of a large, circular open area, almost like a park. A huge, dome shaped something—probably a partially buried theater or arena of some kind—sticks out of the ground in the center. Four pathways on this side of campus surround the center dome like spokes on a wheel. Each path connects the dome to another building sprawling in the distance. Every building is equally sparse and simplistic in design.

The campus is well-lit, and I bet, if I were a bird, I could fly over the top of that dome and see eight pathways leading to eight buildings, one for each direction on this weird compass, working as an architectural theme.

Figures they would be Nordic because Octavia is too tall, probably taller than my dad. She's thin, too. Could probably drop out of school and be a supermodel. The fact does not make me like her better.

Ryker reaches for the handle on the giant door but the red-head steps in front of him and braces her back against the metal, arms crossed over her chest. “No way. I know you, Ry. I know you're not going to tell my father everything. We...” She moves her hand so her pointed finger moves back and forth between herself and Zelik. “... need to know everything.”

Ryker sighs but doesn't let go of my hand. My palm is sweaty, but I'm not willing to give up the contact just yet, either. “I'll tell you everything later. You know how he gets if he's forced to wait too long.”

“That’s never stopped you before. Summarize.” Zel joins the fray, clearly siding with Octavia on this one. “And it’s not him you need to worry about. Lady Astrid and four chamber members are here.”

“Attie is here? Shit.” Ryker’s shocked tone makes my sweaty palm graduate from clammy to disgusting. I still don’t let go. “I should have known as soon as I saw Mirre.”

A raven’s ugly caw breaks the calm of the night, the noise coming from one of the trees in the park area, as if the bird is just as upset as Ryker at the news.

“Exactly,” Zel agrees.

“Why? The next chamber meeting isn’t for months.” Ryker’s cool is gone, replaced by thinned lips and, apparently, the need to pace. He lets go of my hand and begins a five-step circuit back and forth in front of us. “Is my mother with them?”

“No.”

“Maybe they already know about Dani.” He runs his hand through his hair and resumes pacing as we all watch. “How could they know? I didn’t tell anyone.”

I rub my sweaty palms on my jeans and shrug. I have no idea what is going on with any of them. I don’t know this place, their parents, the chamber people, or these nosy friends of Ryker’s. To be one hundred percent honest, I don’t really care. Either they aren’t real, which makes them irrelevant, or they are real, but I’ve never met any of them, nor heard of them, in my life. So? Looking for a care.... Nope. Got nothing.

Octavia puts her hands on her hips and glares at Ryker’s pacing. “Come on. We deserve an explanation. I deserve an explanation.” She takes a step toward Ryker, voice clouded with distress. “You didn’t even tell me you were leaving! I had to harass Zelik to figure out you left school grounds. Do you realize how dangerous that is?”

Zelik grimaces sheepishly at Ryker and raises one shoulder in a half-shrug. “Sorry, dude. She threatened me.”

She lowers her voice to ask her last question, and I hear concern, confusion, and betrayal. “Why would you risk your life for some mortal girl?” She spares me a side-ways glance. “No offense.”

Yeah. Right.

Ryker rubs his temples with his fingers and lets out a frustrated sigh. “Octavia...”

When Ryker says her name with that fancy accent of his—which I hate that he does, by the way—it really does befit the rich daughter of the school’s principal. Dean? President? I have no idea. Top dog will do for now. *Woof, woof*, Octavia.

If I had to assign her father, Astavar, a dog breed, it would be Doberman Pinscher. For her? Something sleek, but moody. Irish Setter? Maybe a Coonhound? Nope. Definitely not a Coonhound. Red Poodle? Yes! Fancy. Smart. Loyal. High maintenance, Miss Cashmere Sweater.

Books about dogs were one of my favorite things to get at the library when I was young. Everything I need to know about a person, I can figure out by assigning them a canine persona. Of course, I only do this to people I don’t like.

Ryker interrupts the serious business of person-to-dog-breed classification. “I know this is going to sound crazy, but Dani is not mortal. She’s a legacy.”

Octavia’s face loses its color. Her gaze darts over to me and locks on. Evaluating. Zelik lets loose a rather creative array of whispered curses which culminate in one question. “How is that possible?”

“I don’t know, but it’s the truth.”

“How did you find her?” Octavia is still glaring at me. “How is she not dead?”

“I’m right here, people. No need to talk about me in third person.” Irritating, to say the least. Octavia and Zelik are reacting to Ryker’s news like I’m a cockroach who scurried out from under the stove and they’re arguing over who has to grab the shoe to smash me.

“How do you know she’s one of us?” Zelik asks.

The door swings open and there stands Astavar, wearing the same scowl that I assume is permanently etched into his face. “A question to which we would all like an answer.”

My three companions freeze like deer in headlights. I lean over a bit to inspect the small group of people standing directly behind the older man. Four more middle-aged suits, two men and two women, and one very small older woman with a twinkle in her eye. Sixty? At least.

She smiles at me. “Hello, my dear.”

“Hi.” Looking at her feels like looking at my grandma. The top of her curly, gray head probably won’t reach my nose, she’s smiling, and has a look about her—deep orange skirt suit, matching rust-colored shoes which are decorated with gold buckles—that says she’s comfortable with power, and with attention from others. I wish I had half her obvious confidence. It’s the middle of the night, but she looks like she’s wide awake, not just alert, and she’s bedazzled with gold bracelets, dangling earrings, and gold-rimmed spectacles that make her hazel eyes look as big as an owl’s every time she blinks.

I want to hug her.

Astavar steps aside and allows her to approach me. “So, you’re the cause of all this commotion.” She takes my hands in hers, lifts them just a bit and makes a production of looking me over from head to toe. When she’s done, she holds on to me as she turns to the others who are still standing just inside the entrance. “She doesn’t look like a monster to me.” She squeezes my hands before letting go. “Come along, then, young lady. I would like to go to bed before the sun comes up. I was just beginning to get over my jet lag. This is very inconvenient timing.”

She slips her arm through mine as we enter the building. Her accent, like Ryker’s, is difficult to place. Like I said, I’m curious. “Where are you from?”

“Europe, dear. We live about an hour outside of Oslo.”

“Norway?”

“Of course.”

Of course. Nordic compass. Norway. Not sure what these people are doing in Massachusetts, but whatever. Based on what I’ve heard, the super-rich are always a bit eccentric. I wonder what it would be like to never worry about money. My parents have a small house and steady jobs. We aren’t poor, but there isn’t a lot of money left over after they pay the bills, either.

The elder woman and I are followed by the rest of the group. Astavar, four suits, Ryker, Zelik and Octavia file in behind us into a conference room not much bigger than my family’s kitchen. The table in the center is small and only has six chairs for ten of us.

My escort walks me to one of the chairs and indicates I should sit. I do. She sits on my right. I am surprised, but grateful, when Ryker turns down an offer to sit and instead takes up position standing directly behind me, his hands on the high back of the chair on either side of my head. Zelik and Octavia flank him in a united front. The four suits fill the remaining seats and Astavar moves to stand opposite me behind two of them, probably so it’s easier for him to glare at me. Or Ryker. Probably both. I don’t think he likes either one of us.

“Now then.” My orange wearing, spectacled companion clears her throat. “I am Astrid Forsetta, Ryker’s great-aunt. You can call me Attie.”

“I’m Daniella Price, but I prefer Dani.”

“Should I call you Dani, then?”

“Sure.”

Her smile could melt the titanic iceberg in five minutes flat. I still want to hug her. She smells like chamomile and lavender tea and she’s so small there is nothing at all threatening about her. “Tell us what happened, Dani. How do you know Ryker?”

“Umm, I ran into him when I was walking after school. When I saw him get hit by the truck.”

Astavar’s sharp gasp is a deeper, louder version of Octavia’s. The suits remain motionless around the table, staring at me like mannequins taking up space. If they didn’t blink every now and again, I might genuinely begin to wonder.

I look up over my shoulder at Ryker. Didn’t he tell them? “Sorry. I thought they would already know.”

His hand slides down momentarily to squeeze my shoulder and I almost sigh in relief that he’s not upset I spilled the beans. “It’s okay.”

“Nothing about this is okay. What truck?” Astavar’s dark eyes lock on me first. “You’d better explain yourself, young lady.”

When I remain silent—unwilling to accidentally give away any more of Ryker’s secrets—Astavar’s attention moves over my head, and he glowers at Ryker instead.

“It was an accident. I was out... exploring, and I didn’t watch where I was going. A pickup ran into me and took off. It was a hit and run.”

“Did you see the driver, Dani?” Attie’s soft question penetrates even as Astavar’s face is turning a shade of reddish purple I’ve never seen on a real person before.

“Yeah. Just a normal looking white man. Brown hair. Little bit of a beard. Maybe forty? I don’t know. I only saw him for a flash. Less than a second.”

Astavar has set his sights on Ryker. “You steal my car, leave campus without permission, or protection, and don’t report your injuries upon your return?”

“I wasn’t injured. At least, not by the time I came back to school.”

I think Astavar is going to blow—a brains all over the wall explosion—which sounds nuts, but not as out-of-bounds as one would think after the night I’ve had.

“You—” He points a long, bony finger at me. “You do not belong here. And you—” His rant, and his finger, are now directed at Ryker. “I warned you. You are a student here. You are disobedient, disrespectful, and have broken too many rules to list. I will write a formal report and deliver it to the queen tomorrow. Even you are not immune to the consequences of your actions, Your Highness. I will have you expelled.”

Is he serious? Can he have Ryker kicked out of school? My heart is racing, but when I look up at Ryker, he looks cold as ice, not in the least intimidated as he holds Astavar’s gaze.

“I apologize for stealing your car. I will have it replaced. I will explain myself to my mother. But you are never to speak to me or Dani like that again. Are we clear?” With every phrase, Ryker’s voice becomes quieter and more deadly, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. The tension is so thick it feels like there is electricity floating around the room.

Astavar remains silent for long moments before closing his eyes, taking a deep breath and opening them again. “Indeed.”

Ryker’s hand comes to rest on my shoulder once more. This time, I lift my own, so his fingers intertwine with mine. My chest flutters like a butterfly is trapped inside. I could get used to him sticking up for me. Not that I need that from him, but I sure as hell enjoyed it. To be honest, I get tired, constantly fighting for my right to exist in this world. It feels good to have an ally, someone so clearly willing to fight for me, even if we’ve only known each other for a few days.

I don’t dare say another word. There’s an awkward pause as Ryker and Astavar continue their suffocating standoff. It’s like everyone else is afraid to stick their head above ground for fear of having it shot off.

“We may be dealing with a direct assault on the crown. The Servants grow bold.” One of the male suits makes the statement like he’s describing a piece of gum on the bottom of his shoe, monotone and bored out of his mind.

“We may. I will inform the queen and ask Mirre to investigate.” Attie’s voice is anything but calm, and I glance

over to see her inspecting me with renewed interest. That sparkle she has in her eyes? I figure out it isn't due to friendliness or fun. She's wicked smart. Sharp. Her gaze glances over our handholding as she tilts her head to look up at her nephew. "Ryker, you know the rules. Why did you bring her here?"

"She's one of us. She's a legacy."

"Impossible." Astavar's denial is instant. "We've kept track of the family bloodlines for thousands of years. If she were a legacy, the draug would have killed her when she was a child."

"She is one of us. I don't know how she escaped the draug for so long. I'm still working on that." Ryker is calm, his smooth tone helps me keep my shit together. These people are all talking nonsense. I don't understand any of it. What servants? And an attack, as in someone trying to murder Ryker? Not just an accident?

"Delusions do not survive scrutiny, young man. We have detailed records from every family bloodline. If she were one of us, we would have known the moment she was born."

Ryker is unaffected. "I know it sounds impossible. But I would be dead if Dani hadn't healed me. Twice." He releases my hand and then pulls the backpack from his shoulder. He zips open the top and pulls bloodstained fabric out. I recognize them immediately and look away as he tosses two items into the center of the table. "If you don't believe me, just look at my clothes!"

I can't help myself; I watch as one of the female suits finally moves, spreading both shirts out over the table, gashes and crusted blood clearly visible on the one from tonight. Blood, asphalt tar, and dirt on the other. The second shirt I recognize from his run-in with the truck.

I shudder at the sight and stare at my newly manicured fingernails. I almost never have my nails done, but tonight was special. Prom. Senior prom. I don't want to look at those shirts and think about how we were nearly killed tonight. I want to remember something pleasant. Like kissing Ryker. Or

admiring the tight T-shirt he's wearing now and the way the soft cotton hugs his toned body. I'm tempted to turn around so I can look at him properly.

"Without Dani, I'd be dead. She was in the right place at the right time. I got lucky."

Astavar glares at me like he hates me for existing.

Attie pokes at the fabric, widening the claw-torn shreds for inspection. "I don't believe in luck."

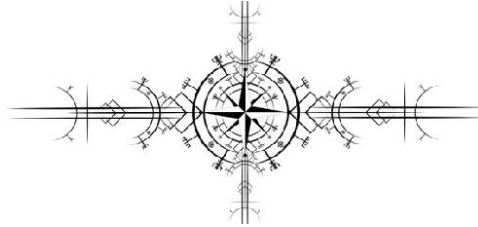
She sits back down and taps perfectly manicured fingernails on the tabletop. I doubt those immaculate, neutral toned beauties are ever bare or snarled. Ever. "They both believe what they are saying, Astavar. There is only one way to be certain. She must be tested."

Tested? What does that mean? Is it going to hurt? Because I'm pretty sure they aren't talking about a standard math exam. I hope it's not needles. I hate needles.

"Now?" Astavar sounds like he's just swallowed a mouth full of spiders and is trying to keep them from crawling back out of his mouth.

"Now." Attie rises from her seat and walks toward the door, her heeled shoes making a distinct clicking sound on the hardwood floor. "Now. Tonight. The queen would demand it. Follow me."

SIXTEEN



I feel like one in a line of ducklings as we follow Attie toward the dome structure in the center of campus, traipsing along the stone paths. The crickets are chirping again—I'm sure the sun will be up soon—and the wind has picked up enough that I'm grateful for the heavy sweatshirt, even if it is way too pink.

I don't notice the staircase descending into the ground until we are practically on top of it. Even though the campus looks new, the stone steps are well-worn and misshapen from a barrage of footsteps. Ryker walks ahead of me down the stairs and reaches back to take my hand and help me balance. The steps are smooth and reflect the moonlight like they've been polished.

Dim lights are set into the earthen stone walls. We descend and with each step the smell of moldy earth and damp places overwhelms my senses.

There are five complete flights of stairs, with a small landing separating one group from another. There are easily a hundred steps. When we finally reach the bottom, the stairwell fans out into a foyer one would expect to find in a gilded castle, not an underground pit.

The entire perimeter is lined with marble columns, between each, a life-size marble statue. People, mostly, men and women, some with wings like angels and some without. And again, with the enormous set of double doors, except these aren't black, they're a dark-grain wood gilded with silver. I don't recognize any of the symbols. Real silver? I

don't know, but I wouldn't bet against it, not when their school principal drives a Bentley.

This area is poorly lit. Multiple light fixtures line the walls, but none of them are on, leaving us in the dim light coming from the stairwell. The smell of earth is gone completely. Instead, all I can smell is incense burning. Or scented candles? Sage?

Astavar pauses a moment, standing before the imposing doors of mahogany and silver.

Attie places a hand on his arm. He holds still as she turns around and looks past me. "Zelik, dear, do you mind?"

Without saying a word, Zelik moves to the front and places his palm on a round, flat panel of pure silver that's been imbedded in the wall. It's about the size of a serving plate, not tarnished and gray, like the one my grandmother uses every holiday. The metal glitters from geometric cuts so precise it looks like they sliced the metal with a laser. The silver is gleaming, so perfectly polished it's almost white. In the center of the panel, someone carved a lightning bolt.

Zel closes his eyes.

Is that? Is Zel's hand... *glowing*?

A crackling sound fills the air, followed immediately by a burst of light so bright I am momentarily blinded. No doubt, I'll be seeing spots for a while.

I squint, opening my eyes just enough to watch white light flow from the silver beneath Zelik's hand, along small, shimmering threads I hadn't noticed before that line the walls. The light travels as if it has a mind of its own, connecting each lightbulb to the source of power until it feels like we are standing outside in bright sunlight. The silver symbols and designs on the door come to life, the glowing metal somehow making whatever is waiting for us on the other side feel like it's going to be something straight out of a storybook about wizard towers and magic wands.

Once everything is shining with magic Zel light, Ryker's friend lowers his hand and bows, just a bit, to Attie.

“Thank you, dear.” She removes her small, wrinkled hand from Astavar’s forearm. “Astavar, I believe we are ready.”

Octavia’s father—I know to forget that detail would be foolish—opens the double doors. They swing away from us on silent hinges. The light surrounding us is just as bright ahead of us. Apparently, Zel’s glowing hand illuminated the entire building.

Ryker leads me through the archway into a place that feels like it was taken from another time and plopped in the middle of nowhere.

The circular area—stadium, maybe?—is easily the size of two basketball courts. Everywhere I look, my eyes are met with gleaming silver and gold, polished to perfection. There are rows and rows of gorgeous high-backed seats with plump, luxurious cushions, lining the walls in circular tiers that start on the floor and rise to the base of the dome ceiling. The center where we are walking would be clearly visible from every seat. The lights around the edges of the room are designed to look like giant torches, but they are not burning, they are glowing. The dozen or fewer torches light the entire space, their soft rays amplified ten times by the reflective nature of the walls and the dome above.

More marble statues, just like the ones out in the foyer, are positioned around the central floor. There aren’t as many, but these are much larger. I walk by one as we follow Attie straight through the middle. When I look up—the figure is easily three times the size of a normal man—I marvel at the detail carved into the face and beard. The hands. I can see every line over the knuckles. The ring carved on one finger is so multifaceted, it looks like it could be a real gem.

In fact, the statue looks like he could be alive. I don’t know who carved them, but the artist in me is desperate to bring my sketchpad in here and study the figures in more detail. I don’t care how good Michelangelo was—this artist would put him to shame.

What is this place? Who are these people? And what the hell am I doing here?

The sound of our footsteps clicking against the polished marble floor echoes through the hall as we approach the center of the space where a circular, silver platform rises a few inches above the floor. A matching pair of chairs and a small wooden table rest in the center of the platform, like it's been set up for a tea party. The small platform is not big enough to be used for much. Maybe they have cult church here on the weekends and that's where their priest stands to rant at everyone? Or maybe they sacrifice small animals on that silver table when there's a full moon? Who the hell knows? I've never seen anything like this place.

"What is this place?" I lean close to Ryker, whispering in his ear.

"It's the Hall of the Ancients." He responds, his voice so quiet only I will hear over the clatter of our footsteps. "It's where the Chamber meets, and where we hold assemblies and competitions. Our graduation ceremony will be here in a few weeks."

Octavia snorts at that, as if finding offense with something Ryker just said.

So much for not being heard. Which means I'm done asking questions. I nod my head and remain silent, pretending that it makes total sense to have school-wide assemblies in a hall with giant marble statues where every surface, including the floor, is lined with silver and gold.

When we all reach the center platform, Astavar pivots around and speaks loudly over the top of the group. "Mirre? Are the ravenborn in position?"

"Yes, sir."

"Make sure no curious students wander in."

At Mirre's command, the warriors—the ravenborn—position themselves around the circumference of the hall and by each entrance. I see now there are three. I wonder if they are all as fancy as the one that we just went through.

The women stand with perfect posture, the golden plates of their armor a match for the ostentatious surroundings. Even as

late, or early, as it is, their eyes are alert, bodies poised to move at a moment's notice.

I feel like an idiot. I didn't even notice they were here until Astavar spoke to Mirre. How did they get in here? How did I not see or hear them?

Apparently satisfied with their placement, he turns his attention to the much shorter Attie. He practically lurks over her head like Dracula. All he needs is the cape. "Are you sure you want to test the girl?"

"What else is there to do? We must know for sure. Wouldn't it be wonderful if she truly is one of us?" She completely ignores his attempt to intimidate her and smiles at me.

"Either the girl is lying, or he is. Do you believe it a coincidence that our prince would be nearly murdered at the exact moment the girl claims to conveniently appear? And with powers of healing? It is more likely this girl is working for Braelia and the Servants."

That's it. This guy is really getting on my nerves. How many times is he going to call me 'girl'? I know he knows my name. Is he accusing me of trying to kill Ryker? I've never heard anything so stupid in my life. If Astavar has something to say to me....

"I'm right here. And my name isn't 'girl', it's Dani. With an 'i', not a 'y'. I'm no liar, and I have no idea what Braelia is. Never heard of it."

"Her."

"Whatever, dude." Not quite as patronizing as girl, but it's the best I can do in the heat of the moment.

I can practically feel Ryker grinning. He must enjoy watching me call Astavar out on his assholery. I have a feeling not many people get the chance.

Astavar stares blankly at me, eyebrows raised in condescending disbelief. "You're lucky I didn't order Mirre to throw you back outside the barrier. Your mere presence

violates every rule we've established in the last thousand years. If I were you, I wouldn't speak unless spoken to."

"That is quite enough, both of you." Attie's tone doesn't sound old or frail. At all. "Astavar, retrieve the relic."

"Of course. I still believe it more likely this girl is our enemy, and our prince is too... naïve... to recognize the threat." With his last two words, he waves his hand in the air dismissively and starts walking away.

Ryker's arm tenses beside me and I grab his wrist to hold him back. I run my thumb over the top of his hand and speak with stony reassurance. "He's not worth it."

As much as I would love to see Ryker go after Astavar, something tells me the dozen or so ravenborn watching our every move would make that rather difficult. I don't know who they are, exactly, but Astavar has been the one ordering them around, not Ryker, even if he is supposed to be their prince. I'm still not sure that means royal, like Queen of England, royal, or if it's a figure of speech. Maybe it's an honorary title and doesn't have any real power.

Ryker slides his arm from my grip and takes my hand, weaving our fingers together. It feels right. When his fiery eyes meet mine, he cranes his neck, rolls his shoulders. "You're right. He's not worth my energy." Ryker takes a deep breath. "I know this is a lot. How are you holding up?"

How am I holding up? Not well. Not well at all. I'm exhausted, nauseous, wearing neon green plastic shoes and a bubble-gum pink sweatshirt in front of a group of people who obviously dislike me. On top of that, a migraine is starting to make an appearance. "I'm alright. I feel a little out of place. Other than that, I'm hunky-dory." I give him an over-enthusiastic thumbs up and an overtly sarcastic grin.

The mannequins, as I'm beginning to think of them, are standing around like robots programmed to wait. Attie has taken a seat at the small, tea service sized table and looks like the embodiment of peaceful patience. Octavia and Zelik are so quiet, I had forgotten about them until Astavar gave his daughter the side-eye on his way out.

The only noise in the room is my breathing, and it is deafening. A couple hours ago, I was at prom, going through the rite of passage of awkwardly dancing with a cute guy and wondering when he was going to kiss me.

Thankfully, after less than a minute of uncomfortable silence, Astavar reenters the room with a flourish. He has covered his business casual attire with a ceremonial robe that looks like spun gold. I like gold, in general, but it's way too much. He's a bright, shiny peacock.

He carries an ancient, small, wooden chest. I assume the 'relic' he went to fetch is inside. Instead of bee-lining to me, he makes his way over to the center platform. He gingerly places the box on the wooden table in front of Attie. She reaches out and lifts the lid ever so gently. The faint squeak of rusted hinges makes me think this box wasn't made with gold hinges, but iron.

Curious, I crane my neck to look inside. I needn't have bothered trying to hide my interest, because the first thing Attie does is look directly at me. "Come here, Dani. This is for you."

I release Ryker's hand and instantly feel ten times more alone. Astavar has moved to stand directly behind the small table, leaving the seat opposite Attie available for me. She waves her hand to indicate I should take a seat. When I do, she turns the box, so the open side is right in front of me.

I don't know what I expect, but this all-important relic looks like a chunk of plain, clear quartz. The only truly notable thing about it is that the polished globe is about the size of my head. This is the relic? What are we going to do, stare into it like a carnival psychic who gazes into a crystal ball and makes up stories in an overly dramatic voice? It's a rock, people.

Not daring to remove it from the silk-lined cradle in which it rests, I look up at Attie for further direction. "So? What now?"

"Now, dear, Astavar will place the relic in your hands, and you will hold it."

“That’s it?” They want me to hold a piece of quartz that looks like a hundred other polished stones I’ve seen in my lifetime. Hell, the local ‘mystic’ shop has smooth, shiny orbs exactly like this—if a bit smaller—in multiple colors. Clear quartz. Rose quartz. Labradorite. Obsidian. Even plain glass.

“That’s it.”

“Okay. But then I really need to go home. My parents are going to start worrying.”

“What time are they expecting you?” Attie asks.

I ask for the time and realize I’ll be late already. “My curfew is in fifteen minutes.”

She nods and pats the hand I was resting on the table. “I understand. We do not wish to upset your parents. We will get you home as quickly as possible.”

Satisfied, I watch Astavar pull a pair of white silk gloves from the pocket of his peacock robe. With exaggerated movements, he slips the gloves over both hands, and reaches his hands into the box like a magician pouring on the drama for his audience.

Sorry, dude. Not impressed.

He slips his fingers under the base of the large quartz and lifts it from its container, holding it out to me.

Am I supposed to just take it?

I seek out Ryker, just a quick glance, to judge his reaction to this theater. He is watching me with a blank expression. I don’t know what he is hiding behind that mask. Hope? Fear? Nerves? I can’t keep my knee from bouncing up and down under the table. The tension in this room is eating at my insides.

Ryker lowers his chin in a slight nod, reassuring me without saying anything. Somehow, even though I don’t know him that well, he’s become my rock in this mess. Him and me...our connection, is the only thing that makes sense to me right now, and I’m going to hold on to it for dear life.

Finally, Astavar's voice rings out through the empty colosseum space. "We are here tonight because Prince Ryker Forsetta claims to have discovered a lost legacy." Hearing Astavar call Ryker by his full name makes the moment feel official. Royal. I can't believe I was kissing a real-life prince. If little me knew, she would be jumping for joy in her glittery princess dress.

Astavar interrupts my mental fangirl moment and continues his monologue. "Please enter this test into the official record. We are here to test Miss Daniella Price by means of exposure to the Gods' Eye."

"Glory to the Gods!" Attie, Astavar, the mannequins, Ryker, Zelik and Octavia all speak the phrase like members of a church chanting a ritual prayer. I jump a little at the unexpected, sudden wall of sound. I guess I missed the chanting cue card.

Attie addresses me in a more formal tone. "Daniella Price, what you have in front of you is an ancient relic, forged when the gods still walked the earth. It is called the Gods' Eye. The stone emits light when it comes into contact with divine energy."

Okay. Well, they are about to find out exactly how not divine I am.

"Hold the Gods' Eye in both hands, Dani. It will tell us if you are who Ryker believes you to be." Attie doesn't sound like she cares one way or the other about the results. I don't know whether to be relieved or offended.

I try not to shake as I reach for the crystal ball. My heart jackhammers in my chest as my hand gets closer and closer to its cool surface. I don't know what's going to happen, but I don't want to disappoint Ryker or get him in trouble. I want to be special because he believes I am.

Astavar releases the orb as I take its full weight. I expect the stone to be cool to the touch. It's not. It's warm. I release a long breath through my pursed lips as my skin connects to the rock.

Nothing happens.

Shit. I'm not special. I'm not a legacy, or whatever they call it. I'm just plain old me. I had no idea disappointment could hurt this much.

I look up, searching for Ryker. I find him and our gazes lock. "Sorry. I guess I'm not—"

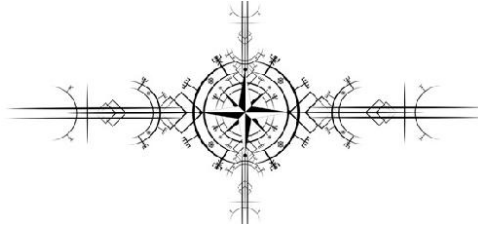
Light explodes through the room like a bolt of lightning has been set free. The energy is so aggressive and violent I flinch, slam my eyes closed and try like hell not to drop the source. The Gods' Eye is now hot to the touch. It's not quite hot enough to burn me, but it's uncomfortable. However, dropping it, breaking it, is unthinkable.

The back of my eyelids are still bright red as some of the light makes its way through them. No way I'm opening them until this thing is done. I hear shouts of surprise and pain. The crystal orb is yanked from my hands. The brightness behind my eyelids fades, so I dare to look around.

Astavar holds the Gods' Eye. It's still glowing, the light fluctuating like a candle flickers, the color oscillating from blue-white to golden sunlight, to sparks that look like someone is welding metal inside the thing. I slump back in my chair and watch Astavar place the bright orb back inside the ancient box and close the lid.

"Holy shit." That would be Zelik. I recognize his voice quite easily.

SEVENTEEN



It takes a while for the spots to clear from my vision. When my eyes adjust to the dim surroundings, I glance around the room. A couple of the suits have their hands covering their faces, the other two are blinking forcefully. Attie's face is a blank slate. I have no idea what she is thinking. Octavia is staring at me, slack-jaw, in complete and utter disbelief. Zelik is shifting his weight from foot-to-foot. The ravenborn guards murmur to one another where they are stationed in pairs near the entrances.

I gather my courage and turn to Ryker. He's grinning at me with smug satisfaction in his eyes. When I just stare, he walks up to me and squats down in front of my chair. He takes my hands in his and smiles, wiggling his eyebrows. "Told ya."

"What does that mean? Was it supposed to do that?"

"Well, yes. And no." His response is almost giddy, and I sense a wild excitement, a nervous energy pouring off him in waves.

"Yes? Or no?"

"Both, Dani."

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

I look across the table to Attie, who is now tapping the side of one cheek with a finger, like she's in deep thinking mode. "Attie?"

The twinkle is back in her eyes, and she smiles at me. Finally. That smile makes me feel like I can breathe. "The

Gods' Eye emits light when it comes in contact with divine energy. The legacies here, like myself and my nephew, can trace our ancestral bloodlines back to a time at least a thousand years before the Vikings ruled the northern seas. Our forefathers were demigods, Miss Price. Half human, half god."

Gods? My excitement dims. These people are out of their minds. I've seen the Thor movies. I've read the books based on Norse mythology. Great stories. They were amazing and entertaining, but not real. "Like Thor and Odin and Ragnarök? Those gods?"

"Precisely."

I shake my head. Nope. No way. I look down into Ryker's face. He looks so genuinely happy that I don't want to ruin his good mood. I try to smile, but the attempt is weak. My heart isn't in it. "I need to go home now. Will you please take me home?"

"Sure."

"No. He will not." Attie rises to her feet and lifts a hand, waving at one of the ravenborn to come over.

"Mirre will take you home. She's my bonded ravenborn, and our finest warrior. It's not safe for you to be out there alone. The draug know about you. They will hunt you now. Mirre will protect you." Attie looks down at Ryker. "And you, young man, have had enough danger and excitement for one night. And we have yet to discuss the matter of Mr. Astavar's stolen car."

Ryker squeezes my hands and stands. "Make sure she's safe."

A loud snort comes from beside me. "Of course. I am more than capable of babysitting a legacy."

Babysitting? Me? That's just rude.

Attie speaks again before I can protest. "We will need to meet your parents, Dani."

Every face in the room is turned to me, but they remain eerily silent, watching me like I'm a bug under a magnifying

glass.

Super uncomfortable. “Why?”

“We need to track your lineage, dear, so we know what you should study here. Each bloodline presents unique talents. With healing, I suspect your ancestor was the goddess Eir, but it’s best to be sure.”

“Study here?” No way. Even if I could afford this place, which I can’t, I’m not starting over at a new school. “I graduate in a few weeks.”

“I’m afraid you will need to withdraw from your school and transfer to Forsetta Academy immediately.” This tiny old woman says it like she is not swinging a wrecking ball at my life. “It’s not safe for legacies, for you, outside the barrier. You will need to train and select a ravenborn protector.”

“I don’t want to switch schools. I’m almost finished.”

“You are just getting started, Dani. Worse, each day you spend outside the barrier is another day the draug can find and kill you. You have seen them. You know I speak the truth. You will not survive on your own.”

The draug hunting *me*? I am going to be sick.

My hands shake like a butterfly’s wings in the wind, and I can’t hear past the roaring of my blood in my ears. I’m now a target for those things that drip rot. They *want* to rip me apart and add *my* limbs to their collection.

My chest is aching and tight. I can’t breathe. It’s all too much.

Ryker pulls me to my feet and wraps his arms around me. “Hey, it’s going to be okay.” His voice is warm and safe, like he’s calming a frightened animal. “It’s going to be ok. You’re okay. We won’t let anything happen to you. Mirre is an excellent fighter. I trust her.”

I nod my head slightly, willing my breath to even out and my hands to stop shaking. Big breath in and hold, exhale through the mouth. Breathe in and out.

It's impossible to put my finger on it, but there's something primal in my gut telling me that I belong with Ryker and his people, meeting him was destiny, and this is the real deal. That same feeling is telling me I should trust my instincts for once and believe everything they're telling me. When I have a moment alone, I can break down. Now is not the time.

After a few moments, I compose myself enough to pull away. Honestly, I just want to go home, crawl into bed, and go to sleep. I don't have the energy left to deal with the repercussions of this.

And what about my parents? As far as I know, they have never had any kind of magical power or weird, paranormal stuff happen around them. Ever. They are the most down-to-earth, totally normal people I know. Sensible. Pragmatic.

Solid.

And I am not adopted. I know I'm not. I can't be. I accept a final hug from Ryker and follow Mirre out of the room, back up the stairs to the parking lot just outside the mansion.

The entire car ride is silent, but that's fine by me. I'm not feeling particularly social after the day I've had. I guess she isn't, either.

I walk in my front door just as the sun is cresting on the horizon. I'm greeted by my mom. Mom has always been an early riser. She's sipping a cup of coffee and looking out the kitchen window, watching the sun come up and assessing her newly planted garden.

"How was your night?" She looks me over from head to toe and a grin flashes across her lips when her gaze reaches the neon green shoes. "I didn't think you were going to change for the after-party." Now she really smiles, and it makes my heart hurt. "Nice shoes. Did you borrow those from Ava?"

"Gorgeous, aren't they?" I avoid answering the question as I hold out my foot and tip my ankle this way and that like I'm showing them off. I'm not a liar. I especially hate lying to my mom. "Dad and Hermes still asleep?" I walk to the table and lean over to give her a half-hug around the shoulders. It's the

best I can do unless she stands up. If she does, I'm afraid I'll give in, wrap my arms around her and tell her everything. Could I? I'm not sure why I shouldn't. They didn't really say. Doesn't matter, I'm too tired to open that can of worms.

"Of course. I think your dad was a Greyhound in another life. Fastest couch potatoes you've ever seen. Both of them."

I chuckle in agreement. I've lost count of the times I've heard that joke. My dad doesn't move until he moves. He ran track in college and still runs almost every day after work. I got my love of the sport from him. When he's not running? Well, let's just say he and our lazy dog get along perfectly.

"You go on up to bed. If I don't see your smiling face by lunchtime, I'll send your dad to wake you up." Oh, yeah. She's still living in the universe where tonight was a normal night in the life of the average high school senior. Her comment about my dad almost makes me laugh. His idea of waking me up is telling Hermes, seventy-five pounds of love attached to a tail, to jump up on my bed and lick me in the face. Ugh. I love that dog. I don't love the 'kisses'.

"Thanks, mom." I retreat to my room, bleary-eyed.

I close the door and slump against it. Holy shit, what a night.

I get out of my borrowed clothes as quickly as possible and change into a pair of dark green pajama shorts and a matching tank top. Cozy.

My bones are heavy and all I want to do is sleep, but I know Ava has probably called and messaged me a million times. I need to let her know I'm okay before I go to bed.

I groan as I force myself to stay awake by pacing around my room, waiting for my laptop to rise from the dead. Stupid updates take forever. I can't fall asleep. Not yet. I pinch and slap my cheeks twice, hoping the sharp pain will wake me up a bit.

I walk over to my bay window and sit on the ledge, looking out over the yard. The rising sun casts a pink and orange hue over the trees. If I listen closely, I can hear the

crickets through the thick window glass. I make a game for myself, counting the number of stars I can see before the rising sun makes them disappear. It's almost impossible to keep track, but that's kind of the point. It will keep me awake until I can send a message to Ava.

Out of the corner of my eye, something moves by the fence. I can't see much—just a glimpse of a shadow—but I know it's Mirre, the warrior assigned to keep the draug away from me. It's good to know she's doing her job, even if it is creepy to think about the fact that she is currently circling the perimeter of my house.

I'd be even more freaked out if we didn't have a live-in, fool-proof security alarm. Hermes has bionic hearing, I swear. Any of those stupid draug show up here, and I'll know. We'll all know.

I walk over to my laptop and sign in. The monitor lights up. After a moment, I see the home screen with a bunch of message notifications. All from Ava. Damn it.

They start out calm enough but get increasingly more worried when I don't respond. A lot of "Where r u?" and "R u ok??" and "I'm gonna kill u for ditching me". And, finally, "I found your phone. You better be hooking up with that hottie and not dead in a ditch. Call me."

Wincing, I try to video call her, but it just keeps ringing. No answer. My stomach twists into a knot. I feel terrible for making her worry, but there's nothing I can do about it now.

I send her a quick message to apologize and promise to explain tomorrow. Obviously, I can't tell her everything, but she deserves some sort of explanation. She is my best friend. I'd like to keep it that way.

I crawl back into bed, this time under the covers. I wrap the sheets around my body in a protective cocoon. There is nothing better than feeling like a cozy burrito. My eyes grow heavy as sleep pulls at me, my mind floating away.

...I am in a crowd, near the back. Around me, people shuffle and fidget. Anticipation fills the space with crackling energy. I see a sword. Just a sword.

Everything goes black, but I can still hear the horrible squelch of flesh and the crunch of bones. The metallic stench of fresh blood is overwhelming. I'm shoved from multiple directions, stumbling as I try to avoid stampeding feet. Screams come from every direction. Front, back. Right next to me.

Why can't I see anything?

Why can't I do anything? I'm frozen, horrified, unable to move, unable to open my eyes, unable to do anything as I fall to the ground and...

I shoot up in bed. The sheets fall to my waist as I gasp for air. My heart pounds so hard it feels like there is a frog jumping around, panicked, in my chest. It takes a moment to remember where I am, that I'm safe, at home, in my bed. Bright light cascades through my sheer curtains. I glance at the wall clock my mom gave me for my tenth birthday. Shit. I didn't change the battery the last time it died. Didn't need to. Like most kids my age, my phone is my life. I don't need a *tick-tock* clock.

Only, I don't have my phone. Ava still has it.

I stumble to the door, rip it open, and call for my parents. Hopefully, they are not outside in the garden where they can't hear me. "What time is it?" I shout.

"Eleven-thirty," my dad shouts back. Hermes barks a greeting. He prances to the stairway, and his heavy paws thud on each step as he makes his way up to my room. Our house isn't big, only two stories with a small living room, kitchen with attached dining area, and three bedrooms upstairs, one of which my mom uses as an office.

Hermes runs to me, and I feel better the moment he leans into my legs in his version of a dog hug. "Hi, buddy. Is it really almost lunchtime?"

His enthusiastic tail wagging confirms that it is, indeed, the correct time, despite the fact that I feel like I've only been asleep for about ten minutes.

My dad whistles from the kitchen and, in a blink, I am abandoned and alone, left behind for a salmon flavored dog treat. Typical.

"Traitor!" I yell after Hermes as he races down the stairs, but he is completely unaffected by my accusations.

I close the door and do some stretches, trying to get my blood flowing. Wake up. The dream is gone. I wish I could blow it off as just another night terror. I have plenty of experience with those. I know how to deal with them.

Except now I know my nightmares are more than dreams. The draug are real. Those monsters, the creatures I've been seeing in my dreams for as long as I can remember, are real. That makes the nightmare so much worse.

I try to recall the most recent images, but I can't make sense of what I saw. The dream is hazy, more feelings than memory. All I know for sure is that at the center of all the death and chaos is a sword. Not a small dagger like Ryker used in the car; an honest-to-god sword that looks like it's at least as long as my arm. Something a knight in full armor would use to chop off heads.

The more I try to focus on the details, the more they slip away like water through my fingers. Shit, I need to remember. I need to know what happens. How to keep it from happening. Because whatever was going on was bad. Really, really bad.

Knowing the way my dreams and "hallucinations" have always worked in the past, I'll see the same thing for a few weeks before anything happens. There's nothing I can do for now. Each time I have the dream, I will remember more, maybe enough to draw in my sketchbook.

Eventually, the people in my visions linger like a tattoo inked directly onto my brain. I try to forget their faces, but unfortunately, the effort is futile. If I close my eyes, I

remember them all. I've seen them so many times, I have every death memorized in a play-by-play format.

Including Ryker's when he was hit by the truck and bled to death in the middle of the street. I saw the light leave his eyes. I watched his body shudder and go still when he gave in and let go. When he left this world.

Was he supposed to die? Am I going to have some scary death spirit, like the Grim Reaper, with a giant scythe and black robes, hunting me down because I took Ryker's death away from him?

As insane as it is...somehow, now that I have a moment to myself to process, a lot of weirdness in my life makes sense. The way I've always seen those monsters hunting in the shadows of my dreams, why I've had to deal with horrible death-hallucinations since childhood was just setting the stage.

I'm a demi-god, or at least a descendant of one, and a freakin' prince wants to date me.

"If my five-year-old self could see me now, she'd be so jealous!" I roll onto my side on my thick rug and chuckle. "Me, a demi-god with magical healing powers and a real-life prince."

I stop when I see the bright pink hoodie on the floor and the sketchbook poking out the top of my backpack.

I crawl over and pick up the book. Sitting on my carpet, I get comfortable, take a deep breath, and open it to a random page.

"Shit." Front and center, a drawing that looks almost exactly like the draug Ryker fought last night. The big one, the monster with eight extra sets of arms and legs protruding from its rotting body. I check the date in the bottom corner.

Two years ago.

"Fuck me." This sketchbook is real. Dr. Patel's initials are written in bright blue pen in the top corner of the drawing. That's how we kept track of the ones I'd already shown her. The pink hoodie is real. I pull the heavy fabric into my lap and squeeze it. Last night really happened. I have dreams that

come true. I see things before they happen. I watch people die. Real people. The little girl in the pool, the woman in the alleyway....

Oh, God.

“Dani!” My mom’s shout pulls me from the edge of a panic attack.

I hear her footsteps, way too fast, running up the stairs. She knocks on my door. “Honey! Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

She opens the door and plops down on my unmade bed. “You have mail. It came this morning. I had to sign for it.”

Who would send me mail? All the college promotional letters have stopped coming for me since it’s close to the end of the school year, and it’s not like I have bills to pay.

I get up and take a seat next to her on the bed. She hands me a large, cream-colored envelope. It’s full, legal size. The paper feels soft and expensive, something one would use on wedding invitations.

I flip it over to check the return address.

Holy shit.

I ignore my mom’s excited chatter and open it up.

Pulling out what looks like a brochure, the chemical smell of freshly printed ink on glossy paper invades my nose. I run my fingers over the shiny cover, recognizing the intricate, ancient-looking crest of Forsetta Academy.

A Norse compass. I know that now.

Flipping through the glossy pages, I come to a full-page picture of a group of students posing together, smiling like they’ve never been happier.

I reach back into the envelope and pull out a thick piece of paper. It’s a letter addressed to me. I read it out loud. “Dear Ms. Price, Congratulations on accepting the invitation to attend Forsetta Academy! We have reserved a dormitory space

in Legacy Hall under your name. Your assigned move in date is May 1st.”

What the hell?

I stop reading. An invitation? The dorms? As in, move all my stuff and live there, dorms? I definitely did not agree to go to the Academy. I liked Attie, but I did not agree to this. Bunch of presumptuous old farts. I flip the paper back and forth, looking for something that would indicate that it's a joke. A hoax. Between the embossed paper and Astavar's real ink signature at the bottom, it looks frustratingly official.

Mom yanks the letter out of my hands, clearly impatient. “You have to read it all. No stopping. You trying to torture me?”

“Hey!” Fumbling, I reach for the letter, but she has already stood up and started pacing. With the letter out of my reach, I wait as her eyes scan the words. After a few seconds, she stops dead in her tracks, eyes wide as I watch her re-read the same lines again. “Holy shit.”

See? I got my foul mouth from somewhere, and it wasn't my dad.

“Logan!” Mom's voice is urgent as she yells for Dad, one hand covering her mouth in surprise.

“What's the big deal, Mom?” I know it looks like they have accepted me to the Academy, but it's not possible. As much as I would like to live within the force field that keeps hell-monsters at bay, my family can't afford to pay the tuition for an elite private boarding school. I graduate in a few weeks. I already have my cap and gown hanging in the closet. Transfer schools? Not going to happen.

“Logan!” In true parental fashion, she ignores my reach for the letter and screams for Dad at a much higher volume, since he didn't respond to her the first time.

Frustrated, I stand so I can read the letter. I don't like the chill rushing over me. I feel like everything is changing too quickly, out of my control.

Distantly, I hear Dad's muffled response from across the house. "What?"

"Come here!" I'm right next to her now, and her raised voice makes me flinch. Surely, there must be a more effective method of communication than screaming across the house. If there is, my parents never figured it out.

I try to read over her shoulder, but my mom must be feeling mischievous because she presses the page flat to her chest.

Dad's lumbering footsteps climb the stairs one ledge at a time. He takes his time getting to my room, complaining the whole way. "Damn knee. I'm gonna need surgery again."

Mom rolls her eyes and responds in a teasing manner. "Well, you could stop running five days a week."

"Nope. I'll get old and fat and my knees will hurt anyway." Finally, he makes it to my room. He leans against the doorframe and smiles at 'his girls'. "Now, what's all the hullabaloo about?"

Mom's response is to read the letter out loud. "Dear Ms. Price, Congratulations on accepting the invitation to attend Forsetta Academy! We have reserved a dormitory space in Legacy Hall under your name. Your assigned move in date is May 1st—"

"But that's Monday!" Dad's face is a mix of confusion, shock, and utter disbelief.

Mom gives him the "stop interrupting me" look and pauses for dramatic effect. Once we both stop chattering, she clears her throat and starts speaking in an authoritative tone. I shake my head affectionately. What a drama queen.

"After careful review of your application and art portfolio, we are pleased to offer you the Dean's Scholarship to pursue a degree in art. The scholarship, supported by our alumni and generous benefactors, includes tuition, room and board, all your books and course materials, and a monthly stipend. This generous offer is guaranteed to renew each year until you graduate from the collegiate branch of the academy, or ten

semesters, whichever occurs first.” Her eyes are glowing as she looks up at me. “They’re even giving you an extra year to graduate. Oh my God, I can’t believe this.”

I can’t believe it either. I’m just as confused as Dad looks. “Wait, what?” I hold out a hand, trying to stop her from reading further.

Mom ignores my outburst and continues reading. “We are thrilled to welcome you to our beautiful campus.”

Dad says nothing for a few seconds, then he crosses the room and envelopes me in a bone-crushing, breath-stopping hug. Lifting me off the ground, he swings me back and forth for a bit before I have to tap out.

“Dad, I can’t breathe.”

“Sorry, baby girl.” He sets me down gently, and I finally catch my breath.

Mom runs her hands over my hair, choking back tears. “They’re moving you in in two days! Why didn’t you tell us you applied?”

That would be because I didn’t.

“I didn’t.” I glance up and see confusion on her face. Well, shit. That won’t work either. “I didn’t want to disappoint you if I didn’t get a scholarship. That school is really expensive.”

“This is so exciting.” My mom is thinking out loud, like she always does. “But what about graduation? You already have your cap and gown?” She looks at my dad for a solution.

I stare at him as well. What am I going to do about that? I don’t want to be a high school dropout, not after the years of hard work.

He scratches his chin and nods. “Dani, didn’t you tell us at winter break that you already had all the requirements to get your diploma?”

My mom practically oozes with glee. “That’s right, she did say that.” She turns to me with a question in her eyes and I nod. Yes, I completely forgot about that, this semester of school was all gravy.

“Yes, yes, yes. You can take this scholarship, go to Forsetta, and still walk with your class for graduation. You already earned the diploma, dear.” She claps her hands together. “You and Ava can go to Senior Breakfast, spend the whole day together, just like you planned. This is so amazing.”

My parents chatter about how incredible this opportunity is for me.

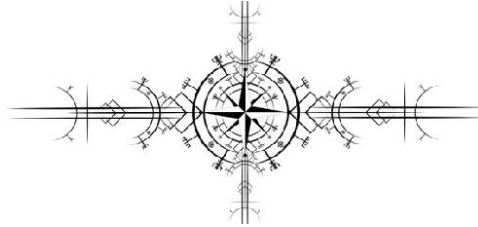
I walk to my window and look down over our small backyard. Hermes is outside, his nose pressed to the fence, tail wagging. Looking closely, I see a woman on the other side. She’s dressed in normal clothing. She’s on the sidewalk outside our house, casually leaning against the cedar post, making friends with my guard dog through the small spaces between the wooden slats.

As if she’s a psychic on top of everything else, she looks up and gives me a nearly imperceptible nod. It’s not Mirre. Guess the guards had some kind of shift change. I don’t know her name, but I know why she’s here.

Suddenly, I’m surprised they gave me two days to upend my entire life and not eight hours.

I wonder if I have Ryker, or Attie, to thank for that.

EIGHTEEN



I can't believe how nervous I am as Mirre, who was sent to pick me up at my house this morning, leads me through Forsetta Academy's administration building. Somehow, it's even more intimidating in full daylight.

She knocks on a large door. A placard on the wall says the office belongs to no other than Astrid Forsetta, Ryker's Aunt Attie. At least I don't have to face the devil himself my first five minutes on campus. I think I actually hate Astavar, and I've never truly hated anyone in my life.

"Come in!" A muffled voice rings out from the other side of the door.

I walk into a classically beautiful office decorated with antique Queen Anne chairs.

I smile when I see Attie. She sits behind a large desk, looking like she stepped out of a fashion magazine. The orange suit is gone. Today she's covered head to toe in a powder blue pantsuit and jacket accented with a white blouse and pearl jewelry. Her hair is piled on top of her head in an updo that looks like it took hours to perfect. She smiles warmly in my direction as we enter.

"Dani! Please, sit." She gestures to the unoccupied chair in front of her. The other chair, a twin to the one I take a seat in, is taken by someone I recognize. "Dani, I believe you know Octavia. She will be the one showing you around campus and helping you adjust to life here at Forsetta."

Octavia. Of course I do—the girl who acted territorial over Ryker, and just happens to be Astavar’s daughter. Lovely.

I turn toward her and attempt a friendly smile. “Hi Octavia. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Yup, same.” She flips her flaming red hair over her shoulder and glances at me briefly before returning her attention to the screen of her cell phone.

It’s not the most enthusiastic greeting, but it’s better than I would have hoped for, considering she probably has me categorized as the girl who is trying to steal her man.

Attie seems satisfied with the interaction and continues her welcoming speech. “We’re so happy to have you here.” She reaches into one of the desk drawers and pulls out a folder full of papers. “Here is your class schedule, as well as a few maps of campus.” She hands me the folder to look through. “If you’ll notice, breakfast is from seven to eleven, and dinner is from five to nine. The library is open weekdays from six am to ten pm, and the gym is open those same hours. Your uniforms are pressed and hanging in your armoire. Please let us know if they aren’t the correct size. Your room is in Legacy Hall. Your roommate is a year younger and is in her junior year, rather than her senior. Her name is Beth, and she’s a lovely girl.”

Octavia coughs like she’s choking. I look over to see if she needs a Heimlich and see that she’s not choking, she’s laughing. What’s so funny?

“Do you have any questions?” Attie is all business, and I feel like she is in a rush to get me on my way.

“Uh, no. No, I don’t think so.” Even if I did, that information was so rapid-fire I don’t have time to figure out what I need to ask. I have a really hard time processing information when I feel like I’m put on the spot. I’m certain I’ll have millions of questions the moment I walk out of this office.

Like, how do they know what size clothes I wear? That’s creepy.

Then again, I did leave my bloody mess of a prom dress here. Guess they could get my size from that.

Attie clasps her hands together and sets them on her desk, smiling warmly the whole time. “Excellent. Octavia will show you to your room now. If you have questions, don’t hesitate to come see me. I know transferring to a new school can be difficult.”

“Thanks.” I appreciate her offer, but I don’t see myself dropping by to chat about my problems with Ryker’s aunt, sister to the queen, super-royal. She is way out of my league.

“Perfect. Now, if you don’t mind, I have urgent matters to attend to.”

Urgent matters? Like draug almost killing the prince, a new girl blasting their Gods’ Eye, Astavar being an uptight jerk? Good luck.

Attie rises from behind her desk and walks us over to the door. “Take good care of her, Octavia.”

Octavia slips her phone into her pocket and nods her head in Attie’s direction. “Of course.”

Why do I have a feeling she doesn’t mean that?

The main campus, from one end to the other, is only a ten-minute walk, and that’s if you’re moving slowly.

Octavia carries a couple of my bags as she leads me across the cobblestone paths of the courtyard, the wheels of my roller bag getting caught in the grooves between stones. It’s mid-morning and students are milling about the area, moving from class to class. As Octavia and I walk by, they stop what they’re doing and stare in our direction.

Even godly teens can’t mind their own damn business.

I can’t stop my gaze from seeking out Ryker as I wrestle with my bags, searching for his dark hair and golden-blue eyes amid the curious crowds. Disappointment settles like a stone

in my gut. He's not here. I haven't seen or heard from him since the night we were attacked. I had hoped he would want to see me as much as I want to see him.

But who knows? He's probably caught up in some princely duties or is in class. I can't expect him to drop everything to come and see me the moment I arrive at the academy.

Octavia stops in front of an enormous building and pivots on the balls of her feet to face me. "This side of campus has the dorms for legacies. This is where you'll be." She uses her thumb to point over her shoulder at the building that is, apparently, my new home. "The dorms for the ravenborn, like me, are on the opposite side."

She drops my luggage, none too gently, and turns around to dig through her shoulder bag. Conversation over, apparently. I bite my lip, hard, to keep myself from lashing out in irritation. I don't want to make enemies on my first day.

After a few seconds of searching, Octavia pulls out an ID badge and places it over a sensor next to the door. The panel beeps and a metallic noise signals the lock has been unlatched.

We enter the building, and I'm once again surprised to note it has a slick modern interior, even though parts of the facade seem to be quite old. After a few turns, and a flight of stairs, we stop in front of door 213. Octavia uses my ID badge to unlock the door, then drags a few of my bags behind her as she enters the room.

I step into my new home. It's not what I expected. I thought it would be cramped, like the dorms I've seen on TV. But this... this is huge, like an apartment. There are two small bedrooms. When I peek inside, I see that each has a full-sized bed pressed against one wall. The occupied room's bed is covered by a black comforter and fuzzy black and white throw pillows. A small lamp sits on the nightstand next to the bed. A shaggy rug completes the motif. Too much black for me, but it's homey.

Each bedroom also has a desk with a comfy-looking chair on wheels, a lamp, and a computer. A printer sits on a shelf

next to each computer, the shelf below stocked with office supplies.

This place is supplying each student with their own computer and printer? Money. I keep forgetting these people have lots and lots of money.

The main room has a mini-fridge, microwave, and a small cabinet and a sink in one corner. A sofa and television sit opposite the kitchen. The room is made complete by a round coffee table and two strategically placed Queen Anne wingback chairs.

The floor is hardwood, polished to a shine, and the ceilings are covered with carvings. I squint, trying to make out the figures in the ceiling. I realize they are winged figures with swords. Some in battle. Some not. It's similar to the style I saw on the main entry doors the other night. I feel like I'm in an ancient temple, looking at hand carved stone.

Octavia walks into the unoccupied bedroom and drops my stuff on the bed. She points to a small door. "That's your bathroom. They're cleaned once a week on Wednesday, so make sure you don't leave a big mess for the staff. My father-Astavar will hear about it if you do. Punishment is joining the cleaning crew for a month."

Note to self: do not leave a mess in the bathroom. And—oh my god, yes! I don't have to clean the bathroom! I could get used to this. I'm impressed, despite myself. "This is amazing."

Octavia shrugs and opens the doors to a large armoire. I could fit my entire life in there. "There's standard school bedding in the bottom drawer. You can use that or buy your own. Whatever. Laundry service is also Wednesday. Make sure whatever you want cleaned is in the hamper before you leave for class."

"Laundry service?"

Octavia stares at me. "Did I stutter?"

"No, I just—"

She interrupts. “You’ll be sharing the common space with your roommate. The key you use to get in here also works the locks on your bedroom door. Don’t lose your key. The office gets bitchy if they have to replace it.”

I’m speechless, literally. Cleaning crew? Laundry service?

“Speaking of your roommate...”

Before she can finish her sentence, a girl with jet black hair barges into my bedroom. She’s wearing a hoodie, ripped black jeans and heavy black boots. Her eye makeup is so dark, it looks like she’s wearing a mask. She takes one look at me and frowns, then marches over to my desk chair and plops down. All of a sudden, there’s tension in the room, heavy like a fog. She pulls a hood covering her hair up around her face and stares at me.

Octavia clears her throat uncomfortably. “Dani, this is Beth, your roommate. Beth, meet Dani. She’s the new legacy. Senior year. Probably Eir.”

Beth, still watching me from under her hood, says nothing.

Octavia rolls her eyes dramatically. “Don’t mind her. Her grandmama is Hel, the goddess of death. They’re all weird and antisocial. Avoid them and you’ll be fine.”

Beth snorts, not bothering to look away from her inspection of me and gives Octavia the middle finger. I wonder how the hell I’m supposed to avoid someone I now live with.

“Classy.” Octavia’s sneer is acidic, but Beth doesn’t see it. “Whatever, weirdo.”

I’m getting the feeling that these two don’t get along.

“Anyway.” Octavia turns her attention back to me. “I’ll leave you to get settled. You have your schedule and a map of the school. Remember, your ID badge is also your room key. Keep it away from strong magnets. You will need it to unlock all the buildings on campus.” She places the thick plastic card in my palm and walks to the door. She freezes with her hand on the door and looks back over her shoulder, all pretense of neutrality replaced by a hostile glare. “Oh, and Dani? I don’t

care who you are, or how you got here. Stay away from Ryker.”

“What?” My jaw is on the floor. Who does she think she is?

“I’ve been Ryker’s assigned protector since we were born. I’m destined to spend my life at his side and defend him at all costs. I don’t trust you, and I don’t like you. If you break his heart...” Her gaze locks with mine, the passion burning in her eyes hotter than it should be. “I’ll kill you.”

I tilt my head to the side, staring at her down-turned lips and malice-filled eyes. Understanding dawns. “You’re in love with him.”

It’s a statement, not a question. And she knows that, too. She looks me up and down with an award-winning sneer. “How I feel doesn’t matter. He is mine to protect. My family has served as ravenborn to the Forsetta bloodline for centuries.”

“And you’re in love with him.” I want her to admit it.

“I’m not. I can’t be. Even if I were, we could never be together.”

“What? Why?”

“Oh my gods, you really know nothing.” She rolls her eyes. “Relationships between ravenborn and legacies are strictly forbidden. Have been since the beginning of time. Can’t mix the two bloodlines. It’s bad news.”

Bad news? “What kind of bad news?”

Octavia grits her teeth and throws her hands in the air. “I’m done here. Just stay away from him.” With that, she storms out of the room and leaves my little apartment, slamming the door behind her.

Beth, whom I’d forgotten, is lounging at my desk, leaning on one elbow. She whistles, the sound soft and foreboding. “Congrats on pissing off the high-and-mighty queen of the school.”

I whip my head around, startled that she spoke for the first time. “I thought you didn’t want to talk to me?”

“Nah. I just hate her.” She jumps off the bed and slides her hood off her head to reveal a silken river of long, black hair and almond-shaped, brown eyes that hint at Asian ancestry. She is gorgeous, and at least as tall as Ryker. One look at her flawless skin and I don’t doubt she has a god’s blood running in her veins. She pats me on the shoulder. “I’m Beth. I hear you saved Ryker’s life. Healed him after a draug attack. That’s badass. Eir, huh?”

She’s referring to my alleged bloodline. “That’s what they tell me.”

She holds out her hand, indicating she wants to take a look at my schedule. I hand the folder to her and watch her flip through pages I have yet to see. “Of course you have Mr. Gauvreau. He’s great. Not like Ms. Shaw. She’s a mean bitch. Nott’s bloodline.” When I look confused, she grins. “Oh, yeah. I forgot you don’t know who anyone is. Nott is the goddess of night. Sounds nice and peaceful, but believe me, they are a vicious bunch. Stay away from them if you can. Same goes for Loki’s descendants. They are famous for their pranks.”

“Okay. Thanks for the tip.” I am so screwed. I don’t know these people. I don’t know Norse history, their traditions, or their gods. I went to Sunday School when I was around six or seven years old, looking for a divine being who could make my nightmares go away. I didn’t find one. Since then, I don’t worry too much about what will happen to me when I die. I’m too busy trying to survive this life to care about the next.

“You can ask me anything, about anyone, any time. Give me your number. I’ll shoot you a text so you can reach me whenever you want. I don’t sleep much, so I really do mean any time.”

I can’t believe how relieved I am when her skull and crossbones emoji appears in my phone’s message list. I save her number and reply with a smiley face. “Pirate fan? You more Pirates of the Caribbean or Blackbeard?”

“Neither. Blackbeard was English. I’m all about the Vikings.”

“Of course.” Now I feel stupid, but she doesn’t say anything else about my blunder.

“I have to run. Trying to get Queen Boudicca to answer my call, but she’s stubborn. Which makes sense.”

“Who?”

“Look her up. She was awesome.” She replaces my paperwork in the folder and hands it to me. “But don’t tell anyone. Astav-Ass would skin me alive.”

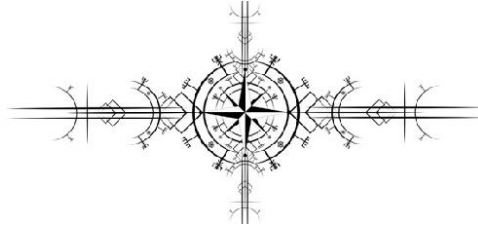
“I won’t say a word.” I speak the vow in earnest. I’m not telling a soul about this conversation, not that I have anyone to tell. Except Ryker, who I have yet to see. I wonder where he is and ignore the hurt welling up inside me, irritated at myself for being so needy. I am not a clingy person. I like my space. Guess being hunted by monsters and forced to leave home all in one weekend has me rattled.

“I’m glad you’re here. Been on my own since I came here in sixth grade. I’m the only one from Hel in our year and no one else wants to room with me.”

“Why not?” She seemed okay so far.

“I talk to dead people.”

NINETEEN



“Everyone, please welcome your new classmate, Dani.” Mr. Gauvreau, the healing arts teacher, stands with me at the front of the room. He speaks in a tone that is vibrant and sing-songy, enthusiasm in every word. I have a feeling he would even sound excited while picking a potato chip off the floor.

Wish I could say the same. Right now, I would rather be anywhere else but here, at the front of the class, being stared at like I’m a freak. *Again.*

Guess thinking this place would be different from my old high school was asking too much. The class is smaller than I’m used to. I counted fifteen heads when I walked in. Every single one of them is now looking at me. Not one of them is smiling.

“Dani, would you like to say anything? Introduce yourself? Tell us something about you?” Mr. Gauvreau prompts me with a smile, his teeth gleaming under the fluorescent lights. He’s young, I’m guessing not yet thirty, with red hair and eyes the color of blue glaciers. He’s hot, for a teacher, which somehow makes this even more embarrassing.

I clear my throat and try to ignore the social anxiety butterflies swirling in my stomach. “Uh, hi. I’m Dani. Nice to meet you all.” My voice comes out timid and small. I can feel the eyes of every student boring into me.

Mr. Gauvreau claps his hands, breaking the tension. “Great! Dani, take a seat wherever you like. Class, let’s continue with our discussion on the integumentary system.”

I make my way to the back of the classroom, my heart sinking as I realize every seat is taken except for one next to a boy who looks like he's twelve. He has a finger up his nose. Ugh. Middle school boys are so gross sometimes.

And why am I in class with a twelve-year-old, anyway?

I pull out the metal stool, its feet screeching against the tile floor. Cringing, I quickly take a seat and pull my notebook out of my bag. I open it to a blank page. The uncivilized boy next to me smiles in greeting, and I give a little nod back.

Diagrams of human anatomy and the layers of skin are displayed on the giant white board on the front wall. Mr. Gauvreau launches into a lecture about the correct way to heal human skin. He's very enthusiastic about every step, focusing on the wound, envisioning how the layers of skin are meant to sit one on top of another like layers of a cake. I appreciate the enthusiasm. I am also surprised that everyone is paying attention instead of talking, texting, or scrolling socials on their phones. This would be an interesting anatomy lecture if the fact that I'm in a magical healing class wasn't taking up most of my head space. These kids, every single one of them, are like me? They can heal things? They have the blood of the Norse god, Eir, in their family? Did they all know their entire lives? Have they been practicing since they were old enough to talk? I don't know anything about how this stuff works.

Apparently, the first half of every day here at the Academy is spent in our "affinity specific" courses. Since they said I must be descended from Eir—I did heal Ryker, twice—that means my first class of the day is always going to be here, learning how to heal, along with everyone else who is also descended from Eir.

Are these people my cousins? I look around. No one looks familiar, but then a fourth or fifth cousin wouldn't look like me, anyway. Right? I don't know. I've never met one.

The class seems to be composed of students from every grade in the pre-collegiate branch of the academy, from middle school to high school. When I looked it up on the internet, I read the academy takes students starting in fifth grade. Guess

that's the reason why I'm sitting next to a snot-nosed middle schooler right now.

After lunch, I have science, math, history, and the like. I guess these people have to leave the safety of the school's barrier and contribute to society eventually.

Mr. Gauvreau rattles on about the dermis and epidermis, what the differences are between them, and what purpose they serve to the human body. I tune it out and start sketching in my notes instead. I already learned all of this in my junior year anatomy class.

My ears perk up at the first mention of actually healing something. As freaked out as I am, I can't deny being able to heal at would be really freaking cool. I might have done it twice, but both times were accidents. I had no idea what I was doing, and I sure as hell wasn't in control of anything.

Mr. Gauvreau claps his hands together enthusiastically, grabbing everyone's attention. "Now, we're going to work with some lab grown skin cells. They are living cells, nurtured by the liquid medium. You're each going to grab a petri dish and a scalpel from the front. Each petri dish has a thin sheet of skin spread across the surface. You're going to cut it in half, and then try to mend it back together."

Excuse me, I'm going to what now? This school has lab grown human skin? Were the donors alive? Are they cloned cells? Normal human, or legacies? Is there a difference?

He continues speaking as I wrestle with my confusion. "Try not to spill. If your petri dish is going dry, bring it to me. And remember, the first step is always making sure you have a tight grip on your divine essence. Control is key. This is a delicate job - the skin is thin and can't handle an untampered waterfall of energy. Channel your essence. Communicate with the cells. Encourage them to come back together. They will listen."

Oh my god. Did he forget I'm new? There's no way I'm going to be able to do this. I have no idea what I'm doing. Zero. None.

I didn't communicate with Ryker's cells when I healed him. Did I?

I'm frozen, trying to figure out how to tell Mr. Gauvreau that I have no idea how to 'channel my essence,' when my classmates rise from their seats to grab their petri dishes and scalpels. Even the twelve-year-old boy next to me doesn't bat an eye at being asked to do the impossible. He slides off his stool and casually walks to the front of the class to collect his skin sample. Within moments, he returns to his seat, petri dish in hand, waiting patiently for Mr. Gauvreau to give permission to start the exercise. He looks unphased. Bored. He rests his head in one hand, gazing out the window. With his other hand, he absently spins the dish around and around, and the slight scraping sound of plastic on the table-top drives me crazy. If I knew him better, I'd take the petri dish away, or tell him to stop.

I do neither. He obviously has zero concern about this exercise. I refuse to be shown up by a twelve-year-old. If he can do this, I can do this.

Get a grip, Dani.

Slowly, I leave the safety of my seat, and take baby steps toward the front of the classroom where the last petri dish stares at me from its place on Mr. Gauvreau's desk. I'm the last one to collect my sample. I could swear the rest of the students' stares are searing holes into the back of my head as I grab the petri dish and a scalpel with shaky hands.

After what seems like an eternity, I settle back into my seat, placing the synthetic skin in front of me. It's even more disgusting than I imagined. Even though it was created in a lab, it looks real enough that it disturbs me to see living skin cells separate from a human body. My stomach roils around, the turbulence of my anxiety making it impossible to keep my distaste under control. The piece of skin is nearly translucent, obviously lacking a blood supply, or any melanin cells that provide color to natural skin. Instead, it sits in some sort of clear fluid that must provide the nutrients and oxygen the cells need to survive. I stare at it.

Am I really supposed to believe this is alive?

“Alright! Most of you have done this before. Now that everyone is seated, you may begin.” The teacher flourishes his arms dramatically, lifting one arm into the air and bringing it down to his side as though he is signaling the start of a race. “I will be walking around to help if you have questions.”

The classroom erupts into hushed murmurs as some students begin, while others talk with their desk mate.

Damn it. Okay. Here we go. *Put your big girl pants on, Dani. You’ve got this.* Disgusted with myself, but having no other option, I watch everyone else to see what they do. The boy next to me takes the top off his petri dish and picks up his scalpel. I watch him slice his skin neatly in half.

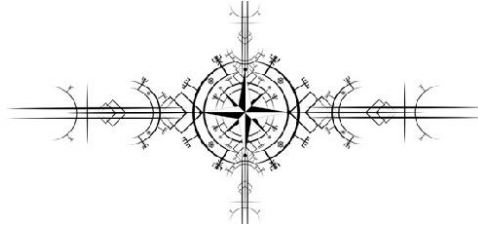
Step one, cut the fleshy sample in half.

That doesn’t require any magical god powers whatsoever. I can do that.

I take a deep breath and release it through pursed lips. With trembling hands, I lift the petri dish cover, removing the only barrier between me and the lab-grown, fleshy substance that shouldn’t exist. The smell of sterile cleaner mixed with soured milk invades my nostrils. Turning my head to the side, I swallow the urge to gag. Disgusting. I was never good with dissections, but even the dead frogs soaked in formalin smelled better than this.

“Uh...You good, bro?” My desk mate’s voice cracks as he asks the question. “You’re kinda pale.”

TWENTY



He must have noticed my discomfort. Ugh. How embarrassing. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” I turn toward him and give him a tight-lipped smile.

He doesn’t seem to buy it, eyebrows raised and eyes questioning, but he shrugs. Thank goodness. I don’t want to explain to some kid that I’m having a hard time cutting some fake skin.

I count to ten before refocusing on the task at hand, trying to hold my breath as much as possible to avoid smelling the skin sample. Determined, I grab the scalpel in my right hand and use my left to brace the petri dish. The skin squelches, liquid bubbling out from underneath it, as I press the sharp edge of the blade into its surface. The blade slices through with relative ease, moving through the skin like a hot knife through butter. There. Perfect halves.

Okay, step one down. It was relatively painless. Now on to step two: merging the two halves back together. Communicating with the skin cells and using my essence to convince them to heal the cut.

Easier said than done.

I pick up one half of the skin sample with a pair of tweezers, holding it up to the light to inspect it. The edges of the cut are jagged, thanks to my trembling hand, and I can see small rips and tears in the tissue where I pressed the scalpel too hard. Guess surgery is not in my future.

I swallow, throat tight; this is the hard part. Merging the two halves back together is more than just stitching them up with a needle and thread. Somehow, I am supposed to ask the skin to make itself whole again.

I glance around the room, watching as my classmates concentrate on their own samples. Some of them are hovering their hands over their Petri dishes to mold the skin back together, while others are chanting under their breath, eyes closed in concentration. The more talented students are already done with the project, and are scrolling through their phones, bored. Two other middle schoolers in the class have started stabbing their sample with the scalpel for fun, giggling maniacally, trying to see how much they can destroy the skin and still stitch it back together.

I feel like an idiot.

The more I look around, the more panicked I become. Everyone knows what they're doing, except me. I can't fail on my first day of class.

I try hovering my hands over my sample first. I close my eyes and, searching within me for whatever energy I tapped into to heal Ryker, I reach deep within myself, looking in every crevice and dark corner, for the light, the heat I remember. I look and look, silently demand whatever magical power I have activate immediately.

There's nothing, just cool silence. And maybe, just maybe, the sarcastic part of my mind is rolling around, laughing. Thanks, me. Very encouraging.

I sigh in exasperation. What did Mr. Gauvreau say again? To communicate with the cells? Maybe I need to say something?

As quietly as I can manage, I say whatever comes to mind, and squeeze my eyes closed. "Hi, skin cells. I hope you're having a wonderful day. Please mend back together. Please, please, please."

The boy next to me lets out a snort. "That's not gonna help, you know."

I can feel my cheeks burning. “Gee, thanks.” I shoot him an exasperated glare and throw my hands up in frustration. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Hey, hey. I didn’t mean to poke fun. It’s just...” He makes a pointed look toward my sliced piece of skin, and then to his. It’s pristine, as good as new. “It’s kinda obvious you have no clue what to do.”

“Well, not everybody grew up learning this stuff.” Frowning, I take one more look around the room. It looks like everyone is done except for me. “Well, maybe everyone *else* did.”

“Yeah, probably. But it’s okay,” the boy says, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “I can help you, if you want.”

I look at him skeptically. “Really? You’ll help me?”

“Sure. I finished already and I have nothin’ better to do.” He shrugs and I realize he is kind of adorable, in a kid brother kind of way. His bright blond hair is sticking up in a multitude of directions, like he didn’t bother combing it before coming to class. He has a few freckles sprinkled over his nose and cheeks, and dark green eyes that remind me of pine trees. When he grows up a bit, he’ll be a real cutie. “I’m Klaus, by the way. Klaus Holme.”

“Dani Price.” I accept his surprisingly firm handshake, feeling grateful for the offer of help, even if it is from a sixth grader. “What do I do?”

“First, stop talking to the cells. They don’t speak English.” He chuckles. “Focus on your energy. Feel it in your body. Imagine it flowing down your arms and into the skin.”

I do as Klaus says, inhaling slowly. I try to calm my racing heart. I close my eyes, imagining the warmth in my chest, the heat I felt while I was healing Ryker. I try to picture it as a bright light that travels through my arms, down to my fingertips, and into the skin. I don’t feel anything, but he said to imagine it, so that’s what I’m doing.

I open one eye to take a peek. Nothing. “Damn it.”

“Is everything alright, Dani?” I jump, startled, when I hear Mr. Gauvreau’s voice directly behind me.

I turn to face him, feeling my face flush red with embarrassment. “Uh, yeah. I’m just having a hard time merging the skin back together. Klaus was trying to help, but?” I lift both hands and shrug. No sense lying to the man. So far, I am completely hopeless at this healing stuff.

He looks down at my sample, frowning slightly. “Hmm. It looks like you’ve cut it well.” He places a reassuring hand on my shoulder, a second on Klaus’s. “Thank you, son.” Klaus practically glows under Mr. Gauvreau’s praise. The kid deserves a pat on the back. He really did try to help me when he didn’t have to. “It’s okay, Dani. This is your first day. It takes time to develop your abilities. Plus, we’re already most of the way through the semester. This is not an easy task. It makes sense you’d be a bit behind. We’ll work on it together.”

Relief washes over me at his words. I’m not going to have to figure it out by myself. Maybe if he helps me catch up with everyone else, I can learn how to heal. I’m not destined to be a total failure. Right?

I watch as Mr. Gauvreau picks up my petri dish, bracing it between his fingers. He closes his eyes, and seconds later, a faint glow emanates from his fingertips. In a matter of moments, the skin mends itself back together. He places my sample in front of me, as good as new. Klaus grins.

I’m in awe, and I stare at him with wide eyes. “How did you do that?”

He smiles, a twinkle in his eye. “Oh, it’s just something I picked up over the years. Now,” He stands up straight and claps his hands together, raising his voice to address the room. “It looks like everyone is finished and ready to go. Put your samples on my desk before you leave. Thank you, everyone.”

The bell rings through the room. All the students—except Klaus—gather their things before filing out of the classroom. As they leave, Mr. Gauvreau turns to me with a smile.

“Dani,” he says, motioning for me to come closer. “Why don’t you come by during my office hours later this week? We can discuss your abilities more in depth and figure out how to get you connected with your essence.”

“That would be great, thanks.” My heart skips a beat as I nod. I’m still embarrassed, but now I’m excited, too. The other kids, as well as Mr. Gauvreau, really did heal their skin samples. I’m supposed to be able to do that, too? Excitement bubbles up within me. I would love to turn into a super badass healer. I wish I didn’t need extra help, but there’s nothing I can do about it. I didn’t grow up learning how to do this stuff.

Klaus is waiting as I gather my things.

“Come on, Dani. I’ll walk you to your next class.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Seems I have two friends now, a goth roommate who talks to dead people, and a friendly twelve-year-old who can heal things with magical powers. At least I won’t ever be bored.

“Hey. How’d it go today?” Beth is in her bedroom when I get back to the dorm. Since she plopped down on my bed, I decide I can do the same. I tumble face-first onto her black comforter, groaning the entire way down.

“What’s wrong with you?” Beth is busy touching up her makeup in the mirror. Apparently, she needs to ensure her eye makeup is sufficiently dark and threatening before heading down to dinner.

“I suck.” I’m having a full-on pity-party and enjoying it.

Beth scoffs, looking up from the mirror to stare at the miserable blob I am. “Your first day was really that bad?”

“Well. No. But yes.” My voice comes out muffled because my face is still buried in the bed.

“Ah, yes. Very clear.”

I sit up with a light chuckle and toss a throw pillow in her direction. She has at least five I can choose from. “You know what I meant.”

Beth dodges the pillow with expertise. “Hey! I’m trying to do my eyeliner! Do you want me to have bad wings?” She stares at me with faked exasperation before turning back to the mirror. “And, no, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Well. I had my first healing class today, and I couldn’t do anything. Even the pick-his-nose sixth grader, who turned out to be kinda sweet, was better than me. It was mortifying.” I groan again as the morning plays back in my mind in frame-by-frame fashion.

“Klaus?”

“Yes.”

“He doesn’t talk to very many people. He’s quiet. Guess he likes you.”

I sat next to him because he was the only one sitting alone in class. I didn’t think anything of it. I was too wrapped up in my own social struggles to wonder why. “The rest of the day was fine. It was just boring math and English, but still. I feel like I shouldn’t be here.” Not to mention Ryker hasn’t shown his face all day, and it’s starting to get to me. I thought we had a connection. He did go to prom with me and kiss me. Is he avoiding me? Did I do something wrong and not know it? Or was he only interested because he wanted to find a lost legacy? Now that I’m here, maybe I don’t matter as much.

“Listen, girlie.” Beth comes over to the foot of the bed, her eye make-up dark, dramatic and expertly applied. “This is a small school. Like, tiny. Miniscule. And we’ve all heard the rumors.”

Oh, great. “What rumors?”

“You not only saved his Royal Highness’s life, but you also almost blew up the Gods’ Eye.”

“I don’t even know what that means. It’s a rock. It glowed. So what?”

“So what? That’s a power test. Raw power. Word is, you’re the most powerful legacy they’ve seen, like ever. Even the ravenborn are obsessed. You’re the only thing anyone is talking about. Most of the legacies here have already chosen their protectors, but not you. You’re going to shake things up. Basically, you can choose any ravenborn to bond with, except Octavia. She’s not going to let Ryker go. Even if she wanted to, her father won’t allow it.”

“Why not? She’s obviously in love with him. If they can’t be together, won’t it just torture her to be around him all the time?”

“You think they care? They are the only family to serve the royals in hundreds of years. Octavia’s mom was the Queen’s protector until a draug killed her a few years ago. No way they are giving up the prestige. Octavia’s been assigned to Ryker since she was born.”

I’m still not a fan, but now I feel sorry for her, just a little. “I’m sure everyone else knows, and I feel stupid for asking, but why can’t ravenborn be with a legacy? What’s the big deal?”

Beth walks back to the mirror and takes her time putting on a thick layer of blood red lipstick. “We used to be with them. At least, that’s what the old books say. But then the babies started going crazy. There’s something wrong with them, something about mixing our genes with theirs. I’m not a scientist, I just know the babies die.”

“They just die? From what?”

“No one knows, but it happens every time. So they decided to forbid mixed marriages a few hundred years ago. Saves everyone a lot of heartache.” She smacks her perfectly outlined lips and turns back to me. “But you don’t have to worry about that. You and Ryker are going to be amazing together. I heard he even made Octavia give you some of her clothes. Please tell me it’s true.”

“What? How do you know about that?”

“Tiny school, remember? There are zero secrets here. You’ve got mojo, Dani. Serious mojo. The whole school is on its toes.”

“If I’m so powerful, why couldn’t I make my stupid skin cells grow back together in class? I can’t even heal a little square of skin in a Petri dish. It was pathetic.”

“You’ll learn.”

“I hope so.”

“Look, if anyone deserves to be here, it’s you.” She winks at me. “Ryker totally thinks so. Am I right?”

“So, does *everyone* know the details of my personal life?”

“Of course. That’s how this place works.” Beth turns to take one last glance at her hair and makeup, running a finger over her lip to smooth out her lipstick. “You’ll get used to it. I’m gonna head down to dinner. Wanna come?”

Dinner? In the dining hall? Where everyone can stare because I’m the shiny new kid? No thanks. “I think I’ll stay here. Mope just a little bit more, you know?” Maybe I’ll sneak down at the end of dinner when there will be fewer people to deal with.

Beth shrugs, grabbing her jacket and bag. “Suit yourself.”

Before I know it, she is out the door and I’m alone with my thoughts. Today was overwhelming. I miss my old school. It sucked, but at least I knew what to expect every day.

I wonder how Ava is doing? Maybe I should call her. I would love to hear a familiar voice, although I’m not sure she would pick up. She’s still disappointed I transferred schools right before the end of the year. I double checked with the school, and I still qualify to walk with her at West’s graduation ceremony. I only spoke with her once during the packing and moving chaos—just long enough for me to apologize for going missing at prom—and we’ve only texted a few times since. I sent her a message to let her know I was still going to graduation, but she didn’t bother to respond.

Yesterday, she messaged me that Isabella is in the hospital. Everyone is talking about how she had a nervous breakdown after Madison's mysterious disappearance. Ava dropped that bit of information, and then proceeded to hound me with questions I couldn't answer. Did I see anything that night? Hear anything? Why did I disappear around the same time Isabella came running in screaming bloody murder?

Naturally, I kept my answers brief, which, I assume, only made Ava more suspicious.

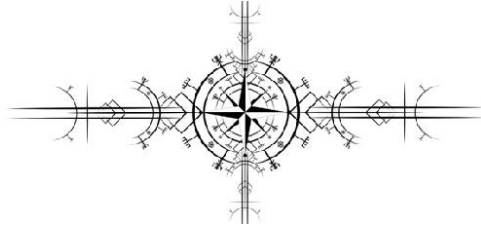
I wander to the living area. I'm alone for the first time since I arrived and surprised when I realize I don't want to be. There is one person I have been anxious to see. Where is he? The thought of being able to spend time with Ryker is the only reason this school transfer seemed bearable.

Maybe his interest truly was more about finding a new legacy than about wanting to spend time with me. I can't believe I thought he would care about me after only knowing me for a few weeks when he's been with Octavia, and the rest of these people, his entire life. I asked him to prom. Maybe he only said yes so he could investigate me and my family.

A knock at my door pulls me away from my thoughts. Did Beth forget her keys or something? Sighing, I meander over to the door. "Done with dinner already?" I ask as I turn the handle and pull the door open.

I freeze. Dark hair and ice-blue eyes stare at me. A playful grin fills my stomach with butterflies. Definitely not Beth.

TWENTY-ONE



“Did you say dinner? I’m starving. Wanna go grab a bite?” Ryker leans against the door frame, one hand in his jean pocket and the other resting on his thigh. His smug, flirtatious look sets my cheeks on fire, and a zoo full of animals start rough housing in my stomach.

“Ryker.” My mouth opens and closes a few times before any words come out. “Where have you been?”

The gleam in his eyes dulls, the grin ever so slowly slips from his face. Shit. Wrong thing to say. Total mood killer. Wasn’t I just lamenting how he hadn’t come to welcome me yet? Now here he is, looking hot as hell, asking me to dinner, and I ask him why he hasn’t shown up for me since I got here.

“Sorry, I got caught up.”

“But...aren’t you the prince? Can’t you do whatever you want?”

A dejected smile dances on his lips, and he shrugs. “That doesn’t mean much when the one in charge is my mother.”

I know I should be keeping up, but it’s like his presence is a double shot of whiskey going straight into my system. Thinking is highly over-rated when I can admire him instead. “Your mother?”

“The queen. Reigning monarch. The all-important sovereign.” With each nickname, he adds more dramatic inflection to his voice.

“Oh.” I look toward the carpeted floor, deflated. The queen is keeping him busy with royal duties? No wonder he hasn’t come to see me. I keep forgetting that I’m a nobody, and he’s somebody. I really don’t know anything about him or his life, but I want to know. I want to know everything.

Ryker rests one hand on my shoulder and gently lifts my chin with the other so we are staring into each other’s eyes. “Hey, don’t worry.” He grins softly, his gaze dancing between my eyes and my lips. “Nothing is going to keep me away from you.”

I want so badly to give into the moment, to accept that he wants me, that the connection we have is real. Things have been moving so fast I feel like my head is still spinning. The temptation is there, to give in, to be lost in his gaze and consumed by his lips. But I still have important questions. I need to know what’s going on between him and Octavia. She says they can’t be together, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have feelings for her. If he is going to be ‘bound for life’ to that girl, I need to know exactly what that entails. Ryker is wonderful, but I don’t want to set myself up to have my heart broken.

I step back from his touch, breaking the intimate moment, and smile to make sure he knows it’s not a complete rejection. It’s more like a caution sign. “You said something about dinner?”

He looks a little disappointed but shakes it off quickly. “Yeah. I know a quiet place where we can enjoy a meal without prying eyes. We could grab food from the dining hall and make a break for it?”

“Sounds perfect.” I nod, grateful he doesn’t want to sit in a room surrounded by curious students. “I’ve been stared at enough today. Fresh meat.”

He nods, understanding crossing his features. “Trust me, I get it. Why do you think I know where all the quiet spots are?”

“Right. That makes sense.” He is a prince, after all.

“Come on.” He nods his head toward the hall and starts walking away.

Quickly, I grab my phone and badge and jog to catch up with him. The last thing I want to do is get locked out of my dorm on the first day.

We walk to the dining hall in about five minutes, ignoring the open stares of every student we happen to pass along the way. Once inside, we skirt along the edges of the kitchen area, each grabbing what looks to me like picnic food offerings. Fresh fruit, sandwiches, chips and pretzels, and bottled drinks are spread out in a large buffet style offering. We both stay away from the center, where the smell of freshly baked bread and hot meats make my mouth water. I’m starving, but I want to be alone with Ryker more than I care about stuffing my face. We are in and out of the hall as quickly as possible. I don’t catch a single person watching us in the bustling dining room.

Feeling like a bank robber escaping with fistfuls of money, I am all smiles as Ryker leads me to a secluded area on campus, a spot I never would have stumbled upon if he hadn’t shown me.

One minute we’re on the cobblestone path, the next we are alone inside a small, hidden garden behind one of the classroom buildings. A wooden bench sits at the base of a giant oak tree, the grassy, oval area surrounded by smaller trees and shrubs that provide privacy. A masterfully crafted, life-sized statue of a winged female warrior on horseback dominates the center of the garden. A large bird, I assume it’s a raven, sits on one of her shoulders. The warrior is covered in complex armor and holds a spear. The setting sun turns the sky shades of coral, pink and gold. The light reflects from the statues’ eyes, almost like the horse and rider are on fire within. The effect is stunning and dramatic.

I wish I had my sketchbook. I pull out my phone and snap a picture because, wow.

“I see them all the time. I forget how beautiful they are.” I glance at Ryker and find him staring up at the sculpture.

“It’s amazing. Who is it supposed to be?”

He studies the two figures for so long, I assume he’s not going to answer, but he does. “She’s a Valkyrie on the battlefield, choosing from among the dead those who will serve Odin in Valhalla.”

He sounds so serious, like the Valkyries are real, like Valhalla is a real place. Like Odin is real. Which seems completely ridiculous until I remember why I am here, why all the students are here. God blood. Magical powers.

I realize that even though I saw the draug, and was attacked by them, I didn’t truly think about the implications of all this until now. Not really. Norse gods? Mythology? Valkyrie? Monsters? Thor throwing lightning bolts? Is it all real? All of it?

What about Egyptian gods? Asian? Mayan? Ancient Babylonian? If the Norse pantheon exists, if those gods exist, what about the rest of them? So many cultures with their own beliefs, their own deities.

That’s a freaking lot of gods. Seems like a bit much to me. And if these people are Norse, what about Ragnarök? Isn’t that an end of the world prophecy? Does Ryker believe the world is doomed?

My thoughts chase one another through my mind like a puppy chasing its tail as the sun’s rays fade just enough to dim the ethereal effect, returning the woman and her steed to nothing more than cold, carved stone.

We sit down on the bench and unwrap our food. I’m sure either the internet, or one of my classes, will teach me what these people think I need to know about their gods. Right now, I just want to be with Ryker and enjoy the peaceful atmosphere.

“So, tell me about yourself. I’ve realized, Dani Price, that I don’t know much about you except your name.” Ryker leans back, looking strangely comfortable for being on a wooden bench, and takes a bite of his sandwich.

I frown, unsure where to start. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything. Everything.” He grins, his eyes sparkling.

“Well, I grew up in a small town outside of Boston. I’ve lived in the same house for almost as long as I can remember.” I try not to grin and fail miserably. He knows exactly where I live. “I’m an only child, so I spent a lot of time drawing.”

He looks at me like I’m a unicorn or something. “I can manage a stick figure, but that’s about it. I bet your art is amazing.”

I laugh. “I like to draw, but I wouldn’t say that. What about you?”

Ryker takes a sip of seltzer water before saying anything. “I grew up in Norway with my parents, also an only child. Moved here in sixth grade to go to the Academy and have been here ever since.”

Huh. That would explain the strange accent. “What about your hobbies? What do you like to do?”

“I don’t really have any.” He shrugs as he takes another bite of his sandwich. “Being princely?”

I roll my eyes and nudge him on the shoulder. I try not to get distracted by the toned muscle I feel underneath. “Oh, come on. Of course you do!”

His smile is melancholic as he explains. “I really don’t. Or if I do, I don’t know what they are. Growing up in the palace was different from all the other kids I knew. My days were filled with training, lessons in history, politics, and etiquette.” His eyes stare off into the distance, hazy, as he remembers his life at home. “Nothing I did was by choice. Every minute of the day was scheduled for me. Even here, I have more of a workload than the others. Trying to get away from it all is the reason I started to sneak out in the first place.”

“So, being royal forced you to steal Astavar’s car?”

“Totally.” If his grin gets any more adorable, I’m going to give in and kiss him. I might have, if I didn’t see the sadness

in his eyes. He is making a joke, but there's a dark truth behind it. He feels trapped. I understand that feeling all too well.

I grab his hand, squeezing it tight. "I'm sorry."

The surprising touch snaps him out of his haze. "No, no, don't be sorry. It's alright. I'm blessed with a life many would kill for."

I bite my lower lip, thinking for a moment. Something about that doesn't sit well with me. "True. But being a prince doesn't mean you don't struggle. I imagine you have to deal with a lot more bullshit than the rest of us."

His breath catches in his chest, eyes bright with the intensity of hidden emotions. I see a storm behind those blue eyes. "A lot more bullshit. Yes. That's one way to put it. Although I doubt my mother would approve."

"Guess it's a good thing she's not here."

He laughs, shaking his head, and removes his hand from mine. His feelings retreat as quickly as they came, his mask falling back into place.

"We didn't come here to talk about my problems. We came here to enjoy each other's company." His voice is light and playful, but there's a hint of something else there too, something that makes me wonder why he's trying to distract me. Maybe his mother is a wicked witch, complete with flying monkeys and a broomstick. I love my mom to pieces, so it's difficult to imagine, but I know some kids who aren't as lucky. "How was your first day of class?"

Grimacing, I inhale through my teeth and shake my head.

He winces playfully in response. "That bad?"

"Kind of." Now it's my turn to shrug. "I made a fool of myself in my healing class this morning. The other classes were normal subjects, so I was fine. But feeling like the ugly duckling this morning colored the rest of my day."

His brows furrow in concern. "What do you mean? How did you make a fool of yourself?"

Oh boy. Now it's my turn to be vulnerable. "I just...I couldn't complete the lab today. There was a kid, Klaus? He looks like he's twelve. He healed his skin sample and then tried to help me. I still couldn't do it. It was embarrassing." My cheeks grow so hot, I just know they are cherry red. I hide my face in the palms of my hands and groan. "Everyone was watching me. Everyone. And I totally failed."

"Hey... hey. Look at me." Ryker pulls my hands from my face and tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "You've saved my life with those powers of yours. Twice. It's difficult to summon abilities on command when you've only ever used them instinctually. Don't be so hard on yourself. With some practice, you'll be kicking ass in no time."

"Thanks. I hope so." He is close enough I can feel his breath, and my heart gallops in response. The cool evening breeze does nothing to cool me down. It's like my face caught on fire and the heat is spreading to the rest of me.

"I mean it, Dani." He reaches for my face, his thumb caressing my cheek. "You're incredible." His eyes dart down to my lips and linger.

I stop breathing as he leans in. My pulse sings, lips parting in anticipation. Suddenly, all I can think about is Octavia and her warning.

Stay away from him.

I break from the moment, jumping up from the bench and pulling away. "We should go," My voice is unsteady, breath coming in ragged gasps.

He pauses, confused. "What? Why?"

"It's late," I stammer out lamely.

Ryker gets up and stands in front of me. His expression is unreadable, and his voice is low when he speaks again. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing."

"Dani. Come on. Please, tell me."

I look into his pleading eyes and hesitate. "Octavia—"

He interrupts, cursing under his breath in a language I don't understand. "What did she say to you?"

I swallow to clear my throat. "She told me to stay away from you. That she's your destined protector and her family's been assigned to yours for centuries. What does that even mean, really?" I swallow, nerves scrambling into a ball of anxious energy in the center of my chest. I asked the question. I really want the answer, but I'm terrified of what it might be.

His silence is deafening as he tries to figure out what to say. His hesitation only makes me more anxious. Why do I feel like I'm standing on the edge of the cliff, on the verge of free falling? As though what he says in this moment is going to impact me in ways I can't explain. Why do I care so much when we aren't even in a relationship?

Ryker runs his hands through his hair in exasperation and pops back down onto the bench. "Every legacy gets bound to a ravenborn protector for life."

I nod.

"Octavia comes from a very influential ravenborn family."

"The Astavar family?"

"No. That's her father's name. Her mother was ravenborn. It's her bloodline."

"Oh." I take a seat beside him as he continues his explanation.

"Her family has protected mine for generations. Since birth, we've known they would assign us to one another."

"She's in love with you." I would feel like I'm betraying her confidence if we were friends. She made it very clear we are not.

"No. She's just very protective of me. She's like my sister."

Yeah, right. Someone might want to tell her that.

"We grew up together. She probably told you to stay away from me for the same reason my parents ordered me to stay

away from you: they see you as a threat.”

“She hates me.”

This time his laugh is pure enjoyment. “She does. She blames you for the draug attack.”

I snort. She hates me. I knew it. “You could just lie to make me feel better.”

His smile disappears. “I can’t promise you much, but I will never lie to you.”

So serious. God. What kind of Octavia minefield did I just walk into? “So, she hates me because when she first met me, we crashed through the barrier with draug on the car? She blames me for putting you in danger?”

He nods. “Pretty much.”

Either he is oblivious to Octavia’s true feelings, or he’s being willfully ignorant. “And being...bound to someone? Why does it sound like it’s more than just being assigned to be someone’s personal bodyguard?”

“Because it is. Ravenborn are different than we are. Their powers lie dormant until they are bound to a legacy. The bond creates a link, allowing energy to flow freely between the two. It’s a mutually beneficial relationship. Ravenborn need the divine essence of legacies to awaken their power, and legacies need the fighting skills and protection of the ravenborn. A lot of our powers, like healing, aren’t offensive. They won’t help us fend off a draug.”

I think of the creatures that attacked us and imagine trying to fight one of them on my own. No way. I saw what Mirre and those other warriors could do that night. “So, I’ll be assigned a ravenborn, too?”

“I’m not sure. Legacies usually choose their protector after years of interacting with them here at school. If they get along well, and the legacy feels comfortable with the ravenborn’s fighting abilities, they will choose to bond.”

“When does this happen? The bonding thing?”

“At graduation. In a few weeks.”

Oh, god. I'm supposed to figure out who to bond with, for life, in a few weeks? Find someone, ask them to bond with me, and what? Hope I'm not making a huge mistake? "What if you don't get along? What if you choose the wrong protector?"

Ryker shakes his head. "It's magic. Once the bond is formed, it's for life. The only way to break the bond is if one of you dies."

"That's worse than marriage. At least if you marry the wrong person, you can get divorced."

"It's the way it's always been, and it's the way it will continue to be. You need a ravenborn protector, Dani. The draug hunt us. They never stop. You can't be out there on your own."

I don't want to be on my own. I want to be with him. But that's far more than I am ready to admit. "I can't do that. I don't know anyone here. I need more time."

"I will ask Octavia about the others. She will know who the best fighters are. If that doesn't work, I'll ask my mother to send some candidates from back home. I'll get you more time. It will be okay. I promise."

"Okay." I purse my lips, not particularly enjoying the thought of Ryker and Octavia being intimately energy-bound for life. I should be worried about bonding with someone I don't know, but I'm not. No one is going to force me to magically bond to someone I don't know or trust. I'll take as long as I need. But Octavia and Ryker together, every day, for the rest of his life?

He must read something on my face that gives away what I'm thinking, because he reaches for my hand and starts playing with my fingers. "You don't have to worry about Octavia. It's not like that. Me and you...that's what matters to me."

Happiness bubbles up inside me until my head fills like the top of a root beer float. I relax, enjoying how his calloused fingers entwine with mine. My head is still ready to put up a

fight, but my heart is waving the white flag. “It’s what matters to me, too.”

Ryker looks at me, his eyes dancing with a softness and warmth that I have never seen before. He leans in, close enough for our noses to brush against one another. His breath washes over my face, tickling my skin and making my heart skip a beat. My cheeks flush as I press myself closer to him. We stay like this for what feels like hours until Ryker pulls back, pressing his lips against mine in a soft, lingering kiss before he pulls away. “We should get back. It’s late.”

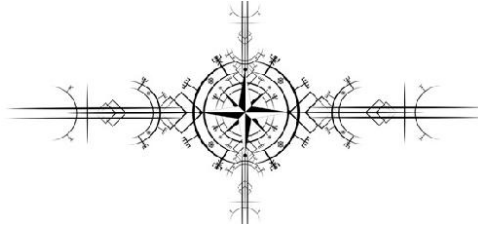
I nod. In the time we’ve spent out here, the sun has set, and crickets now sing in the chilly night air. He walks me back to my dorm room and kisses the top of my head before leaving.

Long after he is gone, I replay the moment our lips connected in my mind. I make a focused effort to settle down for the night and get ready for bed. I lie down. My mind races.

Counting sheep doesn’t work. Sleep means dreams, and dreams mean monsters. I don’t want to sleep. I stare at the ceiling, at the Valkyrie warrior women, and wonder what the hell I’m going to do. I have three problems; One, Ryker is doing dangerous things to my heart. Two, I have to figure out this healing power thing. And three, if I don’t want to die a horrible death at the hands of the draug, I have to find a ravenborn to bond with, to literally spend every day of the rest of my life with. No second chances. No divorce.

‘Til death do us part. For real.

TWENTY-TWO



Light from dozens of torches dances like a group of playful birds, waving and flickering at me from the polished silver and gold walls. The ornate domed ceiling of the Hall of the Ancients holds both light and shadow. Looking up somehow makes my feet feel as if they have sunk ankle deep into the earth. My body is heavy and locked in place, like I'm one of the statues, one of many carved faces among the ancient gods or their Valkyrie warriors. A strange shiver moves through me, like a ghost is passing through my flesh.

A sound draws my attention and I lower my head to discover the once empty seats are filled with people in formal wear. They are present in all ages, from elderly to infant, all dressed in dark suits and floor length gowns. All eyes are focused on three people in the center of the hall. The quaint table and chairs that once held myself and Attie are gone, replaced by two large pillows where two people kneel, facing one another. A chalice sits between them on the floor of the dais. A robed figure stands behind the cup.

I study these three people capturing everyone's attention: a man in a gaudy golden robe, the skin on his hands wrinkled with age. He is wearing a mask and stands above two kneeling students that I recognize instantly.

Ryker kneels, facing Octavia, a fist over his heart. She is in an identical pose opposite him. Octavia is wearing a stunning green gown. She is beautiful. Ryker looks handsome as hell in a suit. A small gold crown sits atop his head and a thick cloak is draped over his shoulder, held in place by a gold

chain across his chest, and secured by a gold pin in the shape of a raven. The dagger he used to cut off the draug's fingers in the car is clearly visible, blade extended, hanging from his hip.

I've never seen him look like this, so perfect, handsome, and royal.

They grip each other's forearms, skin to skin, staring into each other's eyes. The moment feels electric, as if the entire world is holding its breath.

I have never heard such a large space be so quiet, not even in church. Then I know, the way one knows things in dreams; this is their bonding ceremony. This is the moment Ryker and Octavia will combine their power and seal their fates. They will be irrevocably bound together until one of them dies.

I hate watching her claim him. I feel like I'm losing him somehow, giving him away. Irrational thoughts cloud my mind, thoughts of shoving her aside and taking her place. I want him to refuse her, to get up and leave her kneeling there, alone. Which is stupid, I know. Without a protector, a trained warrior, he will be left to fight off draug attacks alone. What if I'm not there to heal him? What if I can't figure out how to control my power? I don't want him to be hurt even more than I don't like seeing him so intimately bonded to another girl.

She smiles, clearly excited. Ryker lowers his chin in silent acknowledgment, but his gaze darts away from her, looking out over the crowd, as if he's looking for someone.

My heart leaps. Is he looking for me?

No. He catches the eye of someone in the first row of seats. A beautiful woman stands and walks up the steps to the dais. One look at the crown on her head, the elaborately embroidered gown, the dark hair that is the exact same shade as her son's, and I know this is Ryker's mother, the queen of these people. She takes her place, standing behind Ryker like any other proud parent.

It's about to happen. I see a sword flash, moving toward their joined forearms. I can't look away.

Sudden, stabbing pain brings me to my knees. I scream, but no sound escapes. It's like a hot knife is buried between my eyes.

I bend down, cradling my burning brain. The scene before me fractures like glass dropped from a great height. Colors swirl like a kaleidoscope in front of me as somehow, I am in the same place, but everything has changed.

Screams reverberate through the hall, ringing through the enclosed space. The chaos is amplified by the domed metal ceiling that hovers over our heads, trapping us inside.

Run!

I need to run, but the exits are crowded with a mob of people trying to force their way through the small spaces. The frantic bodies hold the rest of us inside like a cork keeping wine inside a bottle.

I scan the crowd, searching for Ryker. I don't need to look for very long. He's exactly where I saw him last, on the dais wearing the same suit and cape, same crown. But now he's collapsed on his side. Blood travels over the platform, dripping from the edge to fall on the floor below. A golden sword, its hilt decorated with a giant ruby, protrudes from his chest where the blade was precisely placed to pierce his heart.

I try to run, but I don't move. I cannot get to him. He's dying and I'm forced to watch as his life slowly drains away. He is staring directly at me as the light fades from his eyes. I scream with denial as he shudders and goes limp. He's dead.

No!

I shoot up in bed. The sheets cling to me, sticky with sweat. My forehead collides with something hard.

“Ow, fuck!” Beth cradles her cheek in her hands, nursing a red mark next to her eye.

“Oh my god, I'm so sorry!” The words fly out of my mouth at a rapid pace. “Why are you standing over me like that? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She frowns. “Anyone ever tell you, you have a hard head?”

That makes me smile. “As a matter of fact, yes. More than once.”

“Figures. I’m going to have to cover this up with makeup. It’s going to leave a mark. People will think you punched me.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.” The last thing I want to do is alienate my new roommate by being too weird.

She cuts me off with a loud sigh. “Look, I know it wasn’t on purpose. It’s okay.” She takes a seat on the end of my bed. Why is she in my room? Did I scream? I must have woken her up.

“I’m so sorry. I have a lot of bad dreams.”

“No problem. Are you okay? I couldn’t wake you up.”

Oh, god. How embarrassing. “Yeah, I’m alright. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“It’s okay. Thanks to you, I’m actually going to be on time to class for once.” She grins and I take note of the sunlight coming through my bedroom window.

“What time is it?” I’m exhausted. Surely it’s not morning already? I feel like I’ve been in bed for a whopping ten minutes.

“Time to get up. Class starts in an hour and I’m hungry.” She stands up and heads for the living room. “Come on. Hurry up. They should have cinnamon rolls today, and I don’t want to miss out.”

“Fine. I’m up. I promise.” I chuckle to myself when I notice even her pajamas are black. I guess when she commits to a style, she goes all in.

She stops in her tracks. “Something funny?”

“Yeah. The fact that you need me to have a nightmare to get you to class on time.”

“Oh, ha ha.” Beth rolls her eyes and walks back to her room.

As soon as she's gone, I stumble out of bed to fumble through my bag, searching for my sketchbook. I reach for the first pencil I can find - a short number two pencil sharpened down to almost nothing - and sketch everything I can remember from the dream in as much detail as I can remember. I know what Ryker looks like, but I pay special attention to the sword through his heart. Octavia, in the second vision, was nowhere to be found. Why was that? I write a couple notes about Octavia missing, about the queen, and about the exits being blocked as a crowd of panicked people can't get out.

My hand scrambles across the page, the pencil lead making that light scratching sound I've learned to love, as it brings my visions to life. After a few minutes, I hold up my sketch to inspect it. Later, I will go over everything on the page with painstaking attention to detail. Why did I have two different visions of the same event? Are they both possible outcomes? If there are any clues about how to stop the second vision from happening, I need to find them. What good is a glimpse of the future if I can't change it?

I sit, staring at my drawing of the chalice and sword from my nightmare, and fiddle with my pen. Ms. Shaw, my world history teacher, the one Beth warned me about, is droning on and on about something. Her voice is just background noise, her lecture going in one ear and out the other. The room is dark, lights off and the blinds pulled low as Ms. Shaw shows us a series of pictures taken during various archeological digs.

I don't care about forgotten things buried under centuries of dirt. I have much more to worry about in the present, like the fact that I've been introduced to almost all the available ravenborn around my age over the last week, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life with any of them. A few seemed nice enough, but choosing a life partner after knowing them

for a couple of hours feels dangerous and irrational, even for me.

Oh, did I forget to mention I'm in class with twelve-year-olds again? Seems they put me in the 'important' classes I missed out on by not being here. Behind me, one of Beth's friends, an intense and energetic young lady named Nini, nudges me in the shoulder and leans in close.

"Don't worry, Dani. We'll find you someone perfect this summer! We'll ask the old souls for help." Nini talks to dead people, like Beth. Also, according to Beth, Nini is really, really good at it, despite the fact she looks like a little angel with shining blond hair in pig tails and a bone structure any super-model would kill for. She is classically beautiful, like I figure a demi-god should be. The unblinking stare and ability to contact the dead somehow makes her beauty more intense.

"Thanks, Nini." Even I'm not dumb enough to argue with dead people. If Nini can get them to tell me who the best ravenborn for me would be, I'm all ears.

She pats me on the shoulder, flicks her hair, and straightens in her seat.

If I don't choose a ravenborn to be my protector, I can't go through the bonding ceremony and move on with next year's curriculum. I'll be left behind, basically repeat my last year of high school while everyone else goes on, to both university level courses, and training with their newly bonded partner.

Having a ravenborn, I've learned, is super important. They not only protect legacies, they can heal us if we're injured, sense the presence of the draug, and also boost a legacy's abilities. Beth told me the bonded energy works both ways. Once they bond to a legacy, their sleeping magic activates, making both legacy and ravenborn more powerful.

Basically, the bond is everything. Which is why all these other kids have been here since they were about twelve, taking classes together and getting to know each other. I wish I'd instantly clicked with someone, but the whole 'til death' bit still makes me queasy if I think about it too long.

Even creepier? Beth told me that if I don't find someone to bond to here, at school, the ravenborn elders will start sending unbonded adults to meet me, the people who finished school and weren't chosen while they were here. And doesn't that sound just wonderful? I have three weeks until graduation. I can delay my choice until the end of summer. After that? I either choose someone or get left behind.

I'm not leaving Ryker, so I guess I better get back out there and meet people.

Ms. Shaw's voice drones on and on as she moves through image after image. Dirt. Old stuff. All I see when I close my eyes—even just a blink—is Ryker and Octavia kneeling, Ryker dying, people screaming.

My nightmare replays in my mind, over and over, as I flick the pen in my hand. One moment, everything in the Hall of the Ancients is peaceful. The next, people are screaming and there's a sword buried in Ryker's chest.

What happened between the two moments? Why didn't I see it happen? Why did the vision feel so fractured? That has never happened before. I dream about other people dying. I'm an observer only. I never feel pain during my nightmares. So why did a sudden headache practically split my skull in half?

The flicker and buzz of the fluorescent lights coming back on overhead snaps me back to the moment as several students raise the blinds and the classroom is flooded with sunshine.

“Okay, class. Don't forget, your essays on The Vanir War are due during finals week. Your essay should focus on the final battle, with a full analysis of the false queen's battle strategies and why they failed.”

With perfect timing, the harsh ring of the bell cuts her off. Ms. Shaw raises her voice to be heard over the thudding of notebooks closing, and the buzz of backpack zippers as students pack up. “That's less than three weeks from now! If you haven't started, you need to do so ASAP!”

False queen? Vanir War? I've never heard anything remotely related in any other history class. I don't enjoy

history, but my parents insisted I take every single class my school offered. I've taken more than my fair share. There is no way I missed an entire war. No way I would have forgotten a 'false queen' either. That actually sounds interesting.

"See you later, Dani." Nini is somehow out of her seat and already skipping out the door. Damn, that girl moves fast. Or maybe I'm way too distracted.

"Okay. Bye." I yell after her, but she's already gone.

I shove my notebook into my bag sideways, not caring when the entire thing curves and bends at my lack of finesse and swing the bag over my shoulder. I push my chair under the desk. "Excuse me, Ms. Shaw?"

With a sniff, she shoves her thin, rectangular glasses up her nose, and looks up from the stack of papers she is organizing on top of her desk. "Yes?"

I look around to make sure all the other students have left. The classroom is empty save for the dust motes floating in the air, glowing like tiny pieces of glitter in the afternoon sun. "Is there any chance I could get some extra time to work on the essay you mentioned? I've never heard of a false queen, or the Vanir War." I sheepishly massage my neck, embarrassed, despite knowing it's normal to need some help, given the circumstances.

She wrinkles her nose and returns her attention to her stack of papers. "No, it's the final. I can't offer any extensions."

"Okay." I twist my lips, thinking. "Well, do you have an office hour I can come to? So I can ask some questions and try to catch up?"

She turns the stack of papers on their side, tapping them against her desk so the edges all line up just right. "The library will have all the resources you need. I suggest you start there."

Irritation bubbles up in my throat at her clear dismissal. She hasn't taken her eyes off that godforsaken stack of papers since I started talking to her. They can't be that engaging. "I only ask because I think you all might be studying events in history I've never even heard of."

Ms. Shaw sets the papers down on her desk with a thud and lets out an exasperated sigh. She looks up and pins me with a glare through the thick lenses of her glasses. “Well, Ms. Price, maybe you should have thought of that before you decided not to pay attention in my class.”

Ouch.

Without saying another word, she leaves the room. She doesn't even give me a chance to defend myself, not that I could.

I watch her leave, anger simmering in my gut.

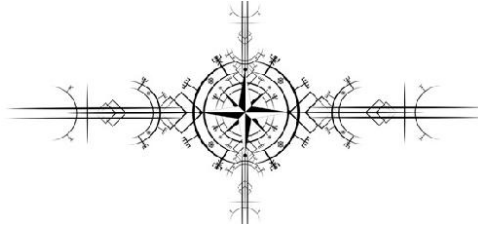
As I walk down the hallway, the stares of other students warm my skin like a spotlight. Normally, I wouldn't care. I've learned to let whispers wash over me. But after the way Ms. Shaw just treated me, and the way I failed in healing class, again, this morning, I feel like a complete outsider. I never thought it would be possible to feel more out of place than I did at my old school. I was wrong.

At least there I was human.

I pull out my phone to check my schedule. Physics. That's where I'm supposed to be heading next.

And where I'm definitely not going.

TWENTY-THREE



There's no way I'm going to sit through another class right now. Not when energy is building inside me like steam inside a pressure cooker, and I haven't been on a good, long run for weeks. I need to work off some steam or I might explode. Working out with Dad always makes me feel better when I'm like this. Since he's not here, guess I'm on my own.

I walk toward the ravenborn dorms. If there's a gym, I figure it's going to be somewhere nearby.

Turns out, it's not hard to find. It's easily the largest building on campus and has an enormous sign with "Gymnasium" in an obnoxiously large and posh font.

The minute I step inside, I'm in awe of the sheer scale of the place. It's state-of-the-art, filled with all kinds of training equipment and high-tech machines, complete with touchscreens and virtual reality displays. The walls are lined with intricate paintings depicting victory scenes from battles long past, while ornate carvings decorate the ceiling beams.

Even their gym is fancy. There has to be a treadmill in here somewhere.

I wander through the empty weight room when the faint clacking of wood hitting wood rings out from deeper inside. Curious, I follow the noise through an arched doorway and into a large, open area with many padded mats.

This room I remember from the dream I had of Ryker and Zelik sparring. Of course, I remember that one. Who could forget the muscles?

Like a flashback to that dream, I see Ryker and Zelik are fighting one another in the middle of the room with ferocity in their eyes and wild joy in their grins. Their movements are synchronized, as though they've been doing this for years. I suppose they probably have. Their wooden staffs clash against one another's in a mesmerizing rhythm that makes me feel like time has slowed. Each movement is so precise and graceful, their attacks lightning fast. It almost looks like they're dancing.

They're so invested in their fervent battle that they haven't noticed they have a spectator. I do my best to inch closer without giving myself away until eventually, I'm near enough to see Ryker's biceps rippling under his plain, black, training T-shirt. Sweat drips from his brow. I watch the way he balances on his right leg just before he lunges at Zelik. He smiles when he lands the hit. I grin as the pain causes Zelik to mumble a string of colorful curses.

That boy looks like an angel but has the mouth of a sailor.

I clap slowly as I step closer and closer. Startled, they whirl towards me, their wooden sticks poised in the exact same position, ready to face the potential threat.

"It's just me."

"Dani?" Ryker lowers his weapon and grins. "What are you doing here?"

I shrug and set my stuff on the floor. After this morning's bloody vision, my daily healing class failure, and Ms. Shaw and her essay from hell, "I came in here looking for a treadmill. I wanted to run."

"Why run, when sparring is so much more fun?" Zelik hops off the mat and tosses his stick in my direction. I catch it in one hand and stare at Ryker, waiting for his reaction.

He backs up and holds out an arm in invitation, indicating where I should stand on the mat, should I join him.

I stare at the staff in my hands and then at Ryker, the carnivorous butterflies making a reappearance in my stomach. "I've never done this before."

Ryker grins. “Don’t worry. We’ll start slow.”

I worry my lower lip with my teeth. I know I can out-run almost everybody, but martial arts? With people who have been training since birth? Ten seconds max, and I guarantee I’ll be knocked on my ass.

“You have to promise you won’t go too fast.”

Ryker tries to subdue his excited victory hop, and fails. It’s adorable. “Cross my heart.”

I take a step forward, rolling the tension out of my neck. “Okay, fine.” I’m almost at the mat when Zelik’s question stops me in my tracks.

“You want to fight in that skirt?”

“Not really.”

He points toward a doorway I didn’t notice when I came in. “Girl’s locker room. Clean sparring clothes are in there.”

I rid myself of the school uniform quickly. When I return to the mat, I’m in the same flexible black fabric the boys are wearing. Ryker greets me with a lopsided smile, leaning on his staff, and my heart stutters in my chest. I move into position opposite him, hoping I’m not about to make a fool of myself. “Ready.”

“We’ll start with the basics.” For a moment, the gymnasium is silent, Ryker’s eyes lighting up with amusement, his stick twirling in front of him like the rotor on an airplane, so fast I can only see the blur. “Maybe Zel and I should show you how it’s done. Then you can copy the moves.”

“Okay.”

Zelik walks back onto the mat, and I step to the edge to watch and learn. They move slowly at first, Ryker calling out the name of each move as they work their way through a practice set. They repeat it, slightly faster this time. The third time, their sticks are a blur, the only other sound in the gym the soft echo of their labored breathing.

When they are finished, Zelik chuckles, twirling his weapon around with intimidating ease. “You ready, Dani?”

Honestly, that looks like a blast, and I am pretty sure I have the first set of moves memorized. “Yes.”

He wiggles his eyebrows at me. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves a new challenger.”

Ryker is smiling at me. Zelik uses the moment to his advantage, while Ryker is distracted, Zelik whacks him in the gut hard enough Ryker folds in half at the waist.

“Ow. Damn it.” Ryker chokes out, doubled over, and glares daggers at Zelik as he struggles to recover. Zelik just bounces on his toes on the mat, his shit-eating grin lighting up his warm brown eyes.

“Don’t let your guard down, Ry, even when a pretty lady is here to distract you.”

My cheeks flush at Zelik’s teasing. I don’t know why hearing him refer to me as pretty makes my heart race, but it does. Maybe because Ryker doesn’t correct him. “I’m not here to distract anyone.” Although, I must admit I don’t mind stealing Ryker’s attention any time I can. “I just wanted to work out.”

Zelik winks at me. “Is that so?”

Ryker straightens back up, clutching his stomach as he regains control of his abdominal muscles. “Ignore him. He just likes to rile people up.”

Zelik scoffs. “Me? I’m innocent.”

“Sure you are.”

“But seriously,” Zelik stops hopping on the balls of his feet for the first time since I walked in the room, “ready to spar with me?”

“Zel...” Ryker growls in warning. “Don’t you dare hurt her.”

Zelik’s only response is to shrug his shoulders and gesture toward me. “She said she wanted to work out. I’m ready. Let’s

go.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean—”

“It’s okay, Ry. I’ll do it.” I feign confidence as both their eyes lock onto me.

Ryker takes a few steps toward me and hesitates before placing his palm on my shoulder. “Are you sure?”

I hesitate for a moment, but I can’t keep feeling so insignificant and powerless. I need this. Both to release my pent-up frustration, and to have a way to ground myself through all the chaos. “Absolutely.” My eyes narrow in focus as I pick up a wooden staff from the pile near the wall and step onto the mat. When I look up to face my opponent, it’s Ryker waiting for me.

“You think I’m going to let Zelik hurt you?” He waits until I’m close, then leans in and kisses me. A quick brush of his lips and he’s gone again. “Not happening.”

Zelik whistles and grins as he struts off the mat, patting Ryker on the shoulder twice. “I guess I’ll leave this one to you.” Then he turns to me and winks. “Kick his ass, Dani.”

Ryker turns toward me, one eyebrow raised in flirtatious challenge. “Do you need me to go over the form again?”

Form? “You mean the order of moves?”

“Yes.”

“No. I memorized it.” I cross my arms and look him over. Slowly. From his fluffy, ruffled hair and the sweat beading his temple, to his broad chest and wide stance. I swallow. God, he looks good. I need to pay attention to the stick in my hands, not the hottie in front of me. But damn, he’s irresistible. “I think I can handle you without too much trouble.” I’m totally flirting. I flip my hair with a false sense of bravado. When his eyes go dark, I know I’m not the only one feeling a bit of attraction.

Maybe I should just ask Zelik to leave so I can have Ryker all to myself.

Zelik hoots in joy from the sidelines.

Ryker grins and stands next to me, demonstrating the proper stance as I move my feet into an identical position. “Have you ever even used a staff before?”

“No.” Not a single time. “But I think I’ll be okay.” Internally, I’m amazed at myself for sounding so confident when all I can think about is how good he smells. Fake it ‘til you make it, right? I can do this. I grin at him because I can’t help myself. Standing next to him makes me feel like smiling. How ridiculous is that?

Ryker chuckles and moves behind me. His arms wrap around me from behind as he shifts the position of my hands on the wooden staff. Not stick, staff. Like a wizard’s. And that is pretty much my last coherent thought as the rich scent of bergamot and citrus combine with his heat pressed to my back to put me in a trance. I lean into him, just enough to feel his firm chest pressed against my back, and to let him know I could stay here, in his arms, for hours.

I hear his sharp intake of breath, but he doesn’t move away. “Dani, you are dangerous.” His arms hug me closer, and his hands remain over mine as he bends down and presses a kiss to the curve of my neck.

“I’m trying to be.” We both know we’re not talking about a stupid wooden stick. I’m still tingling in the places we touched when he releases me and moves back into position to begin our sparring match.

I roll my neck and my joints pop in protest. I’ve been carrying way too much tension. I want to let loose, untamed and unafraid, to feel the rush of adrenaline and the burn of my muscles. I feel like a caged animal, crouched and waiting to be set free. I don’t want to hurt Ryker, but I don’t want to hold back.

Ryker chuckles, his gaze flickering over my body in a way that sucks all the air out of the room. “Alright then, let’s see what you’ve got.”

We both take a few steps back, circling each other like two predators in the wild. I observe him. I’ve seen him fight a few times by now. I know he’s quick, his movements fluid, his

control over his body and his weapon absolute. He's clearly been in martial arts training since he was young. He twirls his staff, and I watch the muscles in his arms tense as he prepares himself for the upcoming fight. "Ready?"

"Yes." I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of the wooden staff in my hands. I can do this.

"Begin." Ryker speaks the name of each move as we flow through the pre-set movements. He says the names of each, I don't listen. I'm too busy repeating the chant I used to memorize the set. *High, low, middle, switch, high low, spin, left, left, left, right right right, high, low, spin.*

We start out slow, but when Ryker realizes I really did memorize the entire set of moves after watching them a couple times, he lifts his eyebrows in silent question. I nod. Yes. Faster.

We repeat the set over and over again, each time a bit faster until our staffs are moving in a blur.

"Yes!" Zelik shouts encouragement, and I realize I'm smiling. This is fun. I just need to keep up with Ryker. Less than an hour ago, I had never touched one of these sticks. Now? I'm moving so fast my weapon is a blur. Even better, Ryker is breathing hard.

Hah! Finally, something at this stupid school I'm good at. Our final move sends a loud crack through the gym. Ryker steps back to starting position and grins. "Ready for a new set?"

"Yes."

He shows me a new series of moves, more complicated than the last. I flow through it easily, and a few minutes later, we are swinging at one another with blurring speed. When I have it mastered, he shows me another. And another. I have no idea how long we've been doing this. My arms scream at me, on fire. These are not my running muscles and my body protests. I don't care, the burn feels good. For the first time since my arrival, I might even be worn out enough to get a good night's sleep. Sweat runs down my temple and I am

fighting a cramp in my side, but the endorphin rush is divine, my shoulders and the back of my neck tingling.

We finish the form and Ryker steps back. I see, to my great satisfaction, that he is breathing just as hard as I am. “You sure you’ve never done this before?” He reaches for the hem of his shirt and pulls it off over his head. Holy abdominals.

I talk, but I’m not speaking to him, more like to his muscular physique. Bad, Dani. Eyes up, girl. I force my attention to his face where a cute as hell grin lets me know he noticed my admiration and didn’t mind one bit. I shrug and smile back. “Dad was a college athlete. I’ve always been good at sports. It’s genetic.”

“The elders are still looking into that, Dani. They are trying to track your lineage.”

“I’m not adopted. What about those three words is so difficult for you people to understand?”

“You people? You are my people.” His gaze dips, just for a moment, and I realize the soft black fabric is not just clinging to me, it’s plastered to every curve I’ve got.

I lunge forward, breaking the thick tension, and aim for his right side, but he easily dodges out of the way. He counters with a swift strike that I narrowly avoid, swinging my staff around to block him. The wood clacks together, sending vibrations down my arms.

The match continues like this for a while, a game of cat and mouse. Every move is scripted based on the forms we just worked through. Strike and counterstrike. Every ounce of frustration and confusion I’ve felt the last few days burns through me as I wait for the perfect opportunity to shock him.

I am not weak. I will figure out this divine healing crap. I am not fucking adopted. Why won’t they listen to me about that? There is video of the birth, my newborn face. My eyes.

As if my thoughts are fuel on a fire, I move faster and faster. Zelik, whom I’d nearly forgotten, whoops from the side of the mat, clearly enjoying the spectacle. Ryker lunges forward and I take advantage of the opening. I know exactly

where the strike is going. Instead of meeting it, I sidestep and swing my staff in a wide arc, striking him on his side. I don't swing with full force. I don't want to hurt him, just get his attention. He grunts but doesn't fall. Instead, he grins at me, his eyes sparkling with surprise and something else that makes my blood heat.

"Not bad," he says, his voice full of amusement. He recovers quickly, and the excitement in his eyes tells me he will not be taking it easy on me anymore.

He comes at me with a flurry of strikes, faster than he's moved before. I block most of them, but one lands solidly on my thigh. I stumble, losing my balance.

Damn, that's going to leave a bruise.

Ryker seizes the opening and, before I know it, he's behind me, has an arm wrapped around my waist, pinning me to him. He bends down to press his cheek to mine. Having his strength wrapped around my body tempts me to lean into him and trust him to keep me safe.

"Do you surrender?" His warm breath tickles my neck, sending shivers down my spine.

"I can't." Two words of absolute truth leave me in a rush of air. I don't know how to give up, it's not in my nature.

I twist away from his body and raise my staff in challenge.

"As you wish."

We begin again and I am bursting with energy. Instead of barely blocking his attacks, I now expect them and meet them with confidence. The burn in my muscles makes me feel alive as our staffs bounce off one another in a series of loud cracks.

Ryker feints left, and I fall for it, leaving myself completely open. He doesn't hesitate and sweeps my feet out from under me.

I groan as I land on my back, my breath knocked out of my lungs. The end of Ryker's staff hovers above my face as though he stopped just before dealing a blow to my head. That would hurt.

“Had enough?” His grin steals any venom from the question, and I realize exactly how tired I am when merely sitting up requires a massive amount of willpower.

“Yeah.” If pressed, I would say rather than muscle and bone, my body is currently marble and mud, heavy and uncooperative.

Ryker reaches a hand down to help me up, and lifts me off the ground with no visible effort.

Zelik walks onto the sparring mat, clapping the entire way. “Damn, Dani! I thought you said you’d never sparred before.”

“I haven’t.” One hand rests on my hip as I struggle to catch my breath, and I take one step and slide my palm down to rub the ache out of my thigh. That hit I took is absolutely going to leave a bruise, a big bruise.

Zelik sees me nursing the wound. “Too bad we don’t have our ravenborn yet. One of them could heal that in a flash.”

I stiffen at the mention of the ravenborn. I haven’t met one I want to bond with, and I don’t think I will in time for the graduation ceremony. I lean on my staff and sigh. “About that, you two have any good recommendations for who I should meet next? Astavar keeps dragging me to the ravenborn classes and introducing me to everyone, but I don’t know. I haven’t clicked with any of them.”

Ryker moves close and runs a hand up and down my arm. “Don’t rush. It’s a big decision.”

“If I don’t choose someone, I can’t go through the ceremony with the rest of the class.”

To my surprise, it’s Zelik who snorts. “Who cares? We all know you’re here. It’s not like you can’t bond to a ravenborn later, without an audience. The ceremony is long, boring, and highly overrated.”

“Thanks. I just didn’t want to disappoint anyone.” I refer to everyone in general, but really, I’m only talking about Ryker. Beth already told me she thinks I should take my time. Now Zelik says the same, so there’s only Ryker whose opinion matters to me.

Ryker breaks out in a massive grin. “Make them wait. Not all ravenborn are chosen, so take your time. If none of the students here are a good fit, there are plenty of others. My mother’s people keep track of every bloodline, legacy and ravenborn. There is a long list of unbonded protectors in the records. A long, long list.”

“Okay.” I smile at him, feeling as if a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders. “So, when do I get to beat you up again?”

Zelik laughs. “Ry and I meet here about three times a week. You should join us.”

“Can’t wait to see what you’ll be able to do with more practice.” Ryker grins, his eyes alight with excitement. “Next time, I’ll let you take a crack at Zel.”

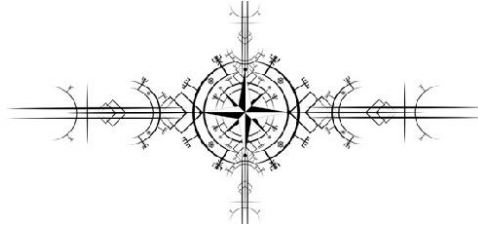
I think about it for a moment, remembering the wildness I felt when I was fighting. Zelik and Ryker both seem to be open to the idea of working with me. The feeling of belonging is heady. Right now, this moment, is the first time I’ve felt a hint of optimism about my future since I came to this place. “I would really like that.”

“So, Ms. Price.” Mr. Astavar sits across from me behind an imposing, executive desk made of rich walnut with decorative engraving that looks like real gold. His hands are laced together in front of him as he leans his elbows on top of the desk, his rusty, red-gray hair gelled to perfection atop his head. “Care to explain why you’re already skipping class in your first week of school?”

Damn. Word travels fast here. It hasn’t even been three hours since I ditched physics and I’ve already been called to *Ass-tavar*’s office.

Wonderful.

TWENTY-FOUR



“I got lost and couldn’t find the classroom. You know, the way you give building and room numbers on the schedule is really confusing.”

Astavar doesn’t move for thirty seconds, staring directly into my eyes. He knows what I’m saying is bullshit, but as long as I don’t cave, he can’t prove anything.

He breaks the standoff and leans back into his cushioned leather chair. “Why didn’t you ask Octavia? It’s her job to help you acclimate to life here.”

“I didn’t want to bother her.”

“Well, why don’t I bother her for you, then?” He reaches in his back pocket for his phone, and after a few taps on the touchscreen, he raises it to his ear. “Come to my office. Yes, now.” He hangs up and places his phone back on the desk.

That might have been the shortest phone call I’ve ever witnessed. Isn’t he speaking to his daughter? Shouldn’t he be... I don’t know... less terse?

Not even five minutes later, there’s a knock on the door and Octavia enters the room with a cautious look on her face. Her eyes meet mine and harden. I guess she’s figured out she was summoned to clean up my mess.

Astavar is the first to speak. “Octavia. How kind of you to join us.”

She takes a few hesitant steps into the room, her long legs eating the distance between her and his desk. “What’s this

about?”

His smile is saccharine, his voice filled with false pleasantries. “Dani here couldn’t find her classroom this afternoon.”

Octavia glances at me, and then at her father. “And?”

“And?” Astavar rises from his seat. At his full height, he’s even taller than Octavia. “You’re supposed to be keeping an eye on her.” With each word, his voice becomes quieter, and laced with more anger.

Octavia pales and bows slightly at the waist. “Yes, sir.”

“It’s not her fault.” The way he’s treating her is really pissing me off. No wonder she’s such an asshole—she’s learned from the best. “I didn’t want to bother her. I thought I could figure it out myself.”

Mr. Astavar looks at me incredulously, as if he can’t believe I’m daring to countermand to him. “And why is that, Ms. Price?”

“I’m used to being independent.” It’s the truth. Kind of.

“Maybe you should reign in your... *independence*... before it gets you into trouble again, yes?”

I want to match his snarl with one of my own, but I know that would be a dangerous move. “Yes, of course.”

He waves his hand dismissively toward the door. “Both of you, leave.”

Octavia follows her father’s orders obediently, shooting me a venomous glare. I can’t blame her; I’m the cause of her father’s anger. I make a mental note to apologize to her later, if I get the chance. As soon as the door closes behind us, she stops and turns to face me, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You’re really something, you know that?” Her voice is low and dangerous.

“What did I do?”

“You just had to go and make excuses for me in front of my father. Now he’s going to think I can’t even handle a

simple task like helping a new student find their way around campus.”

“He was being unfair to you!”

“You don’t know anything about him or our relationship,” Octavia snaps. “And if you keep acting like this, you’ll find out the hard way what he’s capable of.”

I swallow hard, trying to keep myself from getting too defensive. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Save it.” She cuts me off with a glare, poison coating her tongue. “Don’t fuck up again.”

Before I can say another word, she turns on her heel and starts walking down the hall toward the exit.

Okay. In a matter of days, I’ve failed all my healing labs, skipped physics, been caught, pissed off the principal *and* made an enemy of Ryker’s bound-to-be.

This might be a new *how-fast-can-I-mess-things-up* record. If being a mess was an Olympic sport, I’d be a gold medalist.

I trudge back to my dorm room as the sun sets. Delicate orange and pink hues soften everything the light touches—everything except my mood. Mother nature’s display would be easier to appreciate if I hadn’t just suffered a verbal beating from both Astavar and his evil spawn.

The thought of Ryker being bound to asshole junior for his entire life makes me ill. Octavia will always be around him. Every day. Forever.

Gag. Never once in my wildest dreams did I think I’d fall for someone who comes with a permanent she-devil attached. I can’t even blame her for being in love with him, when I am pretty sure I am falling for him myself.

Does he love her? That’s the most important question. Just because a relationship between them is forbidden doesn’t mean he doesn’t wish things were different. Does he want to be with her? When I’m with him, I feel like he’s all mine. But I’ve never been in love before, so what the hell do I know?

Nothing. I'm making things up as I go, and it's exhausting. Right now, all I want to do is hide in my room for the rest of the night.

I scan my key, smashing the badge against the electronic reader. The door lock slides open, then clicks back into place.

Damn it. I try again, and again, but the result doesn't change—each time the door unlocks, then immediately locks again.

You have got to be kidding me.

I'm lost in thought, trying to figure out what to do, when a muffled giggle comes from the other side of the door. "What's the password?"

Beth. She must be turning the lock from the other side. "Uh...please?"

"That's not very creative of you." I can practically hear her eyes rolling, the exasperation in her voice telling me everything I need to know. She will not let me in unless I come up with something worthy. Part of me is annoyed, but a bigger part rises to the challenge.

"You're right." I clear my throat dramatically, making sure she can hear the act through the door. "The password is 'Astavar's a bitch'."

There's a beat of silence before the door clicks open and Beth's peals of laughter echo through the hallway. She pulls on me and I stumble into the room. "Oh my god, that's amazing."

I try to smile, but my heart's not in it. "Thanks."

Her face falls immediately. "Oh, shit. What happened?"

"Skipped class. Got called into Astavar's office. Had a run in with Octavia." I sigh, dropping my backpack on my bed.

Beth visibly bristles. "Ugh. You had to deal with Barbie and the spawn of Satan in one day? Brutal."

"More like in one hour." I shake my head, not wanting to rehash the conversation.

“Well. Fuck ‘em.” Beth redirects the conversation. “Wanna go get dinner?”

I’m about to decline, but when I open my mouth, my stomach grumbles. The workout with Ryker was intense, and my body is demanding I add some fuel to make up for it.

Beth grins at me. “I’ll take that as a yes.” She grabs her keys, checks that her eye makeup is sufficiently smokey, and heads toward the door. “Let’s go get some greasy pizza and forget about those dicks for a while.”

I follow her, grateful for the distraction. “Do they serve pizza here?”

“Yeah, of course. We might be teenagers with superpowers, but we’re still teenagers.”

“Touché.”

As we walk toward the dining hall, Beth chatters away about her latest math project. Something about error analysis and local linearity. I half-listen, nodding and making noncommittal noises whenever it seems appropriate. Really, I’m busy checking my text messages. Ava is asking questions again, questions I can’t really answer. I’m trying to protect her, but she’s making it almost impossible.

Ava: wtf are you dead or what

Me: I’m fine. School sucks. It’s school.

Ava: I need to talk to you in person

Me: I can’t leave campus yet.

Ava: why not you a prisoner there or something

Me: No. Just busy.

Ava: i don’t believe you

I don’t believe me either. I can’t tell her that if I leave the protection of the school’s barrier, I’ll be hunted and murdered by slime monsters with too many arms and legs.

Ava: the cops were at school today asking everyone about prom and Madison disappearing

Me: Did they find her?

Ava: no i think she's dead

Me: Why would you say that?

Ava: isa saw something i totally believe her

Me: What did she say?

Ava: she saw monsters massive disgusting things just like in your sketchbook i want to show them to her and see what she says

Me: Those were nightmares. Not real.

Ava: whatever the cops are talking to everyone who saw her that night they will probably call you

Me: Isa still in the hospital?

Ava: yes and she sounds worse than when you had to miss school for a month you should talk to her and i NEED to talk to you

Me: Maybe I can visit this weekend.

I can't. The minute I go out there, I'll be a draug snack. I don't know how to "hide" my energy away from the draug like Ryker does. And there's no one I can ask to go with me. Not the ravenborn guards. Definitely not one of the students, like Octavia. I could ask Ryker or Zelik, but then we'd just have double or triple god-energy drawing the draug to us. Nothing, outside of learning to control my power and bonding with my own protector, is going to help.

Ava's silence makes me nervous, but there's nothing else I can say. I tune back into Beth and realize she has switched topics, chatting about Nini and how jealous she is that talking to dead people comes so naturally to her.

I'm trying to stay engaged with her rant, but it's hard when I don't really share her jealousy. Dead people are exactly that

—dead. Game over for them. I have absolutely no interest in talking to them either. And as much as I appreciate the fact that Beth is trying to make me feel better, I can't help but miss Ava. Normally, she would be the one to listen to whatever shit I needed to vent about that day. Even though it's for the best that she's not involved in this new world of mine, it doesn't feel like I'm doing a good deed, protecting her. It just feels lonely.

We reach the dining hall. I scan my badge and grab the door handle. Before I can open the door, my phone lights up like a Christmas tree. I look at the screen. Damn, Ava is relentless. I tell Beth to go on without me and move away from the building for a bit of privacy as I answer the call.

“Hey, Ava.”

“What the hell? I've called you like ten times and you don't answer? I'm over here imagining you locked in a dungeon or something. Or dead. I don't trust those people.”

“I texted you back.”

“Anyone who has your phone could do that. I'm serious. I'm worried about you, out there, with those people.”

“Ava. I'm fine. Just busy.” I kick at a tuft of grass and wish I could tell her everything.

“You are not fine. Nothing about Forsetta is fine.” Ava's bullshit detector seems to be operating at maximum capacity.

“What do you mean?” Why is she so upset? Did she somehow find out about these people and their Norse gods and strange powers?

Ava's sigh is so deep, any hope I had that she isn't worried for a good reason evaporates. “Stop acting like you don't know what I'm talking about. I've been doing some research. People die at that school. Sometimes they poof, Dani. Fucking disappear. All the time. Every year, at least one student disappears. And then, the one night your prince charming shows up for prom, Madison disappears? That place is not right.”

“Ryker didn’t do anything wrong. I was with him all night.”

“I went to see Isabella in the hospital. Dani, I’m telling you, something is going on. You have to talk to her. She says she saw monsters. The way she describes them, I think they could be like the ones you drew in your sketches.”

Oh, shit. “What did she say?”

“She said they had rows of teeth and had more than one set of arms and legs. Doesn’t that sound like what you drew?”

“Yeah, it does. But those were just nightmares. Dr. P told me to draw them, so I did. Maybe Isabella got a peek at my drawings at school or something? Got the imagine in her head?”

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. You should talk to her yourself.” Ava’s on a roll, barely stopping for air, and she completely ignores my attempt to defend Ryker. “Anyway, all these people disappear or die, and the cops don’t even investigate. Those people are so rich, they own the cops. They have to be human traffickers or serial killers or something. Dani, are you listening to me? You have to get out of there. Start packing. I’m getting in my car and coming to get you. Right now.”

“No, Ava.” I don’t know what kind of disappearances or deaths Ava is talking about, other than Madison’s, but I’m not surprised. If Ryker hadn’t fought them off, or had failed to keep us on the road when the draug were attacking the car, I would be one of those missing persons. I don’t know what she found when she went digging for dirt about the academy, but she obviously knows something doesn’t add up about this place and these people.

“Then what? This is not okay. I don’t care how much your stupid scholarship is. It’s not worth dying for. Get the hell out of there and go to school with me.”

What am I supposed to tell her?

The truth, that’s what I’m going to tell her. She’s been my best friend for as long as I can remember. I trust her a lot more

than I trust Astavar, Octavia, or any teacher at this school. If I'm being completely honest, I trust her even more than Ryker. She's my sister in every way that counts.

I put my hand over my mouth and whisper into the phone, just loud enough for her to hear me. "You're right. There is something going on here, but it's not what you think. I'm safe. I promise. I'll tell you everything next time I see you."

Silence stretches over the line, and I can just imagine the face she makes when she is thinking hard. "You promise me you're okay? You promise?"

"Yes."

"If you turn up dead, I'm going to kill you."

"Why would anyone kill me?"

"You don't know what I dug up. I don't want to talk about it on the phone."

"Can you send it to me? I wanna know everything."

"Okay. But we still need to talk in person. Can you get out of there this weekend?"

The tone of her voice tells me I really don't have a choice. Risk getting eaten by bloodthirsty monsters, or deal with my best friend's wrath? Honestly, the first option sounds more survivable. Besides, I lasted for eighteen years without becoming draug food. I'll probably be fine for a few hours.

Probably.

Ryker knows how to sneak off campus and come back in one piece. If I ask him nicely, maybe he'll help me figure something out.

I nod, even though she can't see me. Silly. "I'll text you. I'll try to figure something out for Saturday."

"Okay." She is quiet for a moment and I wonder if she's doing what I'm doing, delaying our goodbye. I don't want to hang up. "Stop ignoring my calls. If I don't get proof of life, at least twice a day, I'm coming up there."

I laugh. "I promise. What do you want as proof it's me?"

“Text me the name of someone you’ve had a crush on. That’s something no one else would know.”

True. And there have been a few over the years, mostly movie stars. “I’ll see you in a few days.” I want to cry as we say goodbye and the call ends. I guess I didn’t realize how truly alone I’ve been feeling here. Yes, Ryker is wonderful. Beth is a great roommate. But it’s not the same.

I am halfway back to the cafeteria when I hear a low, gritty croak from behind me. A large, black raven stares up at me from the courtyard cobblestone pathway. It hops back and forth, cocking its head and fluttering its wings to grab my attention. Its jet-black feathers reflect hues of iridescent purple and green as it waves at me.

I know this bird. This time, I know exactly what this means; Ryker is looking for me and this bird will lead the way to him.

Looking back at the guards, I make sure they are out of earshot before I turn back to the raven. “Lead the way.”

The bird hops and squawks, obviously excited, before setting off, one bounce at a time, toward the hedge maze on the outskirts of campus.

I follow. The way its tail feathers wiggle as it navigates over the grass is super cute. Occasionally, it turns its head, making sure I’m still following. Each time, I smile reassuringly, and it gargles in joy.

Who knew birds could be so endearing?

We make it to the entrance of the hedge maze, and it leads me into the twisted pathways with a happy trot. Right, left. Left again, and straight for a bit. Then right. I’m so busy staring at the raven, trying not to lose track of the black bird in the shadows, that I don’t notice my surroundings until it flies onto a tree branch.

I lift my head, and...oh, wow.

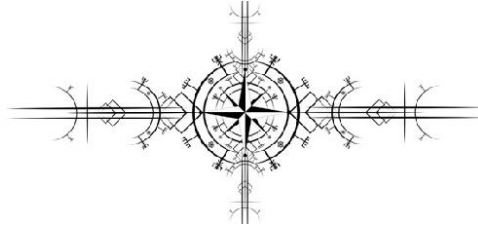
It’s incredible.

The small, circular oasis is home to a petite, calming water fountain surrounded by raised flower beds full of tulips, daffodils and marigolds. A crabapple tree is in full bloom, the little flowers a charming backdrop to the sound of flowing water. An old set of patio furniture sits opposite the entrance. White metal frames support the chairs and table, and are chipped and rusting, giving it a wise, aged sort of character. Bird feeders hang from a massive red maple tree, and fairy lights are draped delicately across the hedge walls.

It feels like a secret, or a dream. The good kind.

“Do you like it?” Ryker’s deep voice makes my heart race. His accent is thicker than usual as he whispers from behind me.

TWENTY-FIVE



I'm so awestruck by this bubble of serenity, I don't even turn to look at him. "It's beautiful."

He wraps his arms around me from behind, resting his chin in the crook of my neck. He places a kiss on my exposed skin so gently it sends shivers down my spine, and I lean back into his embrace, enveloped by his scent. I allow myself to be lost in the moment, in him, let myself forget about everything else. I don't want to worry about draug or Ava, not when I'm alone with Ryker and he's being all romantic and sweet.

His chest rumbles against my back as he speaks. "This is my favorite place on campus. Almost no one knows about it. Which means it's all mine." He pauses, reconsidering his words. "Well, all *ours* now."

I turn in his arms and look up at him. His eyes shine with sincerity. I feel lost in them, drowning in oceans of golden blue. I wonder what he sees in mine? Are his feelings as intense as my own? Does he feel this insane, almost unbearable, connection? Is his heart racing? Does he feel too warm? Are his hands shaking as badly as mine?

Reaching up, I brush a loose strand of hair out of his face, breath catching in my throat. We've only known each other for a few weeks, but it feels like years. I've never felt this way before. This thing between us hit me so hard and fast, it scares me.

He cups my face in his hands and presses his lips to mine. All my doubts and fears fade away. I melt into his kiss, feeling

the heat of his body against mine. His arms slide around my waist, hold me close, making me forget about school and Ava, my failures in class, and every uncertainty. I am only sure about this, about him. I want to be with him. That is the only thing I have no doubts about in this crazy new life I'm living.

All too soon, he pulls away, smiling down at me. "Let's sit and enjoy the view," he says, gesturing what looks like a picnic for two. "I brought food."

My heart swells as he leads me to the plaid picnic blanket. We sit down and I inspect the spread he's laid out—a variety of cheeses, crackers, sliced fruit, and a bottle of sparkling cider. Where he got all this, I don't know. I'm not in the mood to ask questions. It's simple, yet thoughtful, and I can't help but feel like he really cares about me.

A few weeks ago, I only knew him as the boy I had to watch die, over and over, in my dreams.

Maybe I'm still dreaming. He feels like a dream, that's for sure.

"Ryker..." I'm at a loss for words as he settles next to me. "I don't know what to say. Thank you."

He shoots me a devilishly handsome, lopsided grin that has my heart pattering. "You're welcome, Dani." He opens the bottle of sparkling cider, pouring each of us a glass. The fruity, tart aroma makes my mouth water. "I know you had a rough week. Wanted to do something to make you feel better. Plus, I just wanted to be around you."

I take a sip of the cider, letting the flavors dance across my tongue. It's as if the stress of the past week just melts away, leaving only the taste of apples and the lingering warmth of his kiss on my lips. Right now, I exist only in this moment.

"You didn't have to do all this," I say, still in awe of the little oasis he's shown me. "But I'm glad you did. It's amazing here."

He nods in agreement, taking a bite of cheese. "I come here to think, to get away from everything. It's my own little piece of paradise."

“I thought the other place was nice. But this—” I wave my hand around the hidden gem, “This is amazing.”

“And we aren’t being stared at by one of Odin’s deadly Valkyrie.”

The statue in the other garden was impressive and intimidating as hell. “Do the ravenborn all look like that when they are fighting?” Because that would be terrifying, and nearly impossible to hide from the rest of the world.

“No. Odin chose the original Valkyrie from among mortals on the battlefield. The legend goes that he chose the bravest fighters and gave them special powers. That power has been handed down through their family lines for centuries, but the bloodlines, like ours, are diluted now. Most of them can summon magical weapons. A few, like Mirre, can still summon full armor.”

“And Octavia?”

“Her family, well, her mother, was like Mirre. She could summon full armor as well as a weapon and shield. Right now, Mirre is the only one left with that kind of power. We won’t know what Octavia can do until after the bonding ceremony.”

Oh, shit. Talk about a mood killer, at least for me. Now I’m going to be thinking about Octavia bonding to Ryker and being able to look like a bad-ass warrior on a whim. “What about wings? The statue had wings.”

“Nope. The ravenborn lost their wings a few hundred years ago, at least.”

“That stinks. For them, I mean.” I am not an Octavia fan, or a fan of Mirre, if I’m being honest, but being able to fly must have been awesome.

“For us as well. As our powers fade, so do theirs. The elders are quite upset about the future decline of our people.” He crunches a cracker as he speaks about doom and gloom, and the eventual destruction of his people. I guess they’re my people now, too. “That’s why you have caused such a commotion. The way you lit up the Gods’ Eye? Crazy

powerful. Every meeting I go to, you are pretty much the only thing they are all talking about.”

“What? What meetings?”

“The elders in the Chamber. The queen hosts a weekly meeting with the elders from each continent. She makes me go, even though I’m not allowed to speak. They are all speculating about you. Especially Attie. She is thrilled.”

“Why? I can’t do anything. I can’t heal worth a damn.”

He starts to protest, but I cut him off.

“At least not in class.”

His gaze catches mine, then drops to my lips, where his attention lingers. “You healed me when it mattered. I promise you; we will figure it out. You are amazing, Dani. You have no idea how amazing and beautiful you are.”

I lean over and claim his lips for my own, like I have every right, like he’s mine. He falls back on the grass and I follow, my face above his, my hair creating an intimate space where our breaths mingle. I kiss him over and over again. I never want to stop.

The world around us fades away, leaving only him, the taste of his lips, his seductive scent, the gentle way his hands roam over my back. Faintly, I am aware of the gentle trickle of the fountain and the chirping of birds in the tree above. This is the kind of place that makes you forget there’s anything else out there.

In one smooth move, Ryker cups the back of my head and rolls us both until our positions are reversed and I am lying on my back in the soft grass with a gorgeous, too-good-to-be-real hottie leaning over me, one elbow on either side of my head, his forehead pressed to mine. “Dani.”

“What?” Pleased that I don’t have to support my own weight any longer, I place my hands flat on his chest and explore, just a bit, enough to make it even more difficult to get any air into my already burning lungs.

He reaches down and takes my hand, his thumb rubbing gentle circles on my sensitive skin. “Are you okay? You know you can talk to me.”

I feel tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I blink them away, not wanting to ruin the moment. “I’m fine.” I say, squeezing his hand.

He rolls us again and I find myself lying next to him, my head on his shoulder, as we watch the stars begin to show themselves as the sky darkens.

Do I trust him? I want to. “Do you remember my friend Ava, from prom?”

“Of course. She’s your best friend.”

Why is everything he says so charming? Is his perfect word choice part of the divine power inherited by those in the Forsetta bloodline? Wisdom and diplomacy, isn’t that what I heard in class? Is that why his family was chosen to be the rulers of their people? Does he even have to think about what he’s saying? Or is it automatic?

Does it matter?

“Dani?”

“She called me tonight.” I tell him about my conversation with Ava. I also tell him that I promised to meet her outside the barrier. “It’s not just Ava. I want to go talk to Isabella. She was with the girl who disappeared that night.”

“Madison. Yeah, the elders have been talking about that, too.”

“Why?”

“It’s harder to keep our business private when mortals go missing.”

Makes sense. “I want to know what she’s been telling everyone.”

“So, you’re going to sneak off campus?”

“I have to try.”

“Then I’m going with you.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to get hurt.”

He looks down at me with that adorable grin. “We won’t be going alone. And I’ll have *Peace* with me.” He pulls the golden weapon he used on prom night from his pant pocket. “This is one of Odin’s blades. He made one for each of his four sons so they wouldn’t be totally reliant on the Valkyrie for protection. They are the only Aesir weapons capable of killing a draug.” He presses the ruby and, just as I remembered, a slim blade slides from the deceptively small, scepter-like hilt.

“You have a sword named *Peace*?”

“We are not without our own twisted sense of humor.” He puts the blade away, but I wish he wouldn’t. It’s unique and beautiful and I want to inspect it. “Peace was Baldur’s blade. He gave it to his son, Forseti, who passed it to his eldest child, and so on, until my mother gave it to me.”

“What about the other three?”

“Zelik’s family blade is called *Thunder*. His father still carries that one. It was created for Thor.”

An image of the latest hero in the Thor movies crosses my mind. “I thought Thor had a hammer.”

“He did, but the draug were created specifically to feed from and absorb Aesir magic. Even Thor’s hammer cannot defeat one of them.”

Holy shit. “Are you telling me that four little daggers are the only things that can kill the draug?”

“Odin’s blades, *Peace*, *Thunder*, *Vengeance*, *Silence*, and the ravenborn. Yes. They are the only things capable of defeating a draug. But even then, they never die. Vanir magic is earth based. When a draug is killed, it basically dissolves so it can rejoin the Earth and rise again.”

“Like zombies?”

“No. They are far more powerful. They do not lose power over time. The more Aesir magic they absorb, the more powerful they become. And since they never truly die?” He

allows the question to dangle in the air between us like the proverbial carrot. I can't believe we are lying together in the grass, in one of the most romantic spots I ever dreamed existed, talking about ooze dripping monsters, but here we are.

"That thing you fought on prom night, the one with all the extra arms and legs?"

"The most powerful, and oldest, draug I've ever seen, or even heard about. The queen has an entire team of ravenborn hunting in this area, trying to track it down."

"Why? Didn't it get reabsorbed or whatever? It melted into the ground. I watched it disappear."

"Because I asked her to."

"Why?"

"Because it almost killed you."

My heart skips a beat, then races like I'm running a marathon. "That thing would have killed you." I wrap my arm all the way across his chest and squeeze in as close to him as I can. What if I hadn't been there with him? What if this crazy legacy power I had to heal him hadn't worked right? What if Ryker had died that night, trying to protect me?

Everything inside me feels heavy, too tight, like my very cells are about to explode. Maybe leaving school grounds to meet with Ava is not such a good idea after all. I can't ask Ryker to take that kind of risk. "I'll tell Ava I can't meet. I don't want to put you in danger."

A kiss so soft it's like being touched with a feather whispers across my forehead. "Don't worry. You need to talk to her. I will make sure nothing bad happens. This time, I know they're hunting in the area. I promise I'll keep you safe."

Part of me wants to argue. The other part of me really wants to talk to Ava. He seems so sure we'll be safe. We hold each other in silence for long minutes as I play our conversation back in my head. "Did you say Vanir magic?"

"Yes."

“Is that the same Vanir that Ms. Shaw is making us write a paper about?”

“Yes.” He chuckles. “Are you enjoying class with all the babies?”

I give his stomach a playful punch, which only makes him laugh louder. “I think they are all about eleven years old.”

“Twelve. Shaw’s class is basically History 101 for first years.”

“Whatever. I asked Ms. Shaw about the Vanir, but she told me to go to the library. Which I haven’t done yet.” I wander my fingers across his abdomen and enjoy his swift intake of air. His abs are as rock hard as I remember from sparring.

He places his hand over mine, locking my fingers in place. “Behave.”

“That wouldn’t be any fun.”

“So, you have to write an essay about the war?”

“I guess. I don’t know anything about it.”

“The Aesir-Vanir war, a war among gods.”

“I feel stupid around here. You all know all this stuff and I haven’t heard of most of it.”

“I know more than most. My mother had me taking history and diplomacy lessons from private tutors since I was old enough to talk.”

“That sounds awful.” I never thought about what his life must have been like growing up. Or asked about his classes. Damn, I need to be a better... friend? Girlfriend?

“So, do you want me to give you a history lesson now, or later?” Ryker asks, still chuckling a bit.

“Later? I’d rather cuddle some more than talk about war.” I grin at him and stare up into his eyes, silently willing him to kiss me again.

“Me, too,” he says, taking a deep breath. “How about a one-on-one tutoring session?”

Oh, I like the sound of that. “Tomorrow night?”

“Are you asking me on a date? On a school night?”

“I believe I am.”

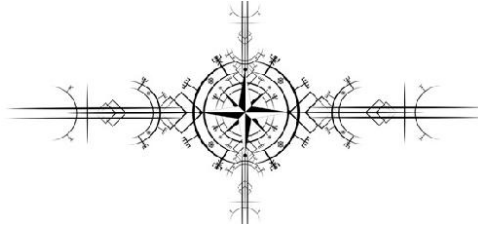
His smile makes all the frustration and failure I’ve endured since coming to this school worth it. “Tomorrow would be perfect. I’ll come to your room after the meeting with my mother.”

“Okay.” I lift my hand from his abdomen and bring his along for the ride, not stopping until I have my lips pressed to his fingers. I know I should let go, but my lips refuse to listen to reason. They linger.

Ryker clears his throat and I finally release him, pleased to see his pulse leaping at the base of his neck. “Zel and I are training again tomorrow morning before class, if you’re interested.”

“I’ll be there.”

TWENTY-SIX



“Your problem is your form.” Zelik uses his sword to point to my legs. “Your core has no stability, your footwork doesn’t support your upper-body movement, you keep getting caught on your heels, moving too slow. And you’re letting your elbows drop.”

I dragged my butt out of bed at an ungodly hour, gave up the cozy feeling of Ryker lying next to me, his arm wrapped around me, to train with Ryker and Zelik, expecting it to be fun like last time. Instead, I’ve just been getting my ass handed to me by Ryker, repeatedly, while Zelik coaches me on my form. I’m a floundering, sloppy mess with this sword.

We started earlier with throwing knives, and I hit the target almost every time, like I’d been training for years. Which made Ryker laugh and Zelik curse. After which, Zelik dragged me over here, where he must have known I would embarrass myself with these stupid swords.

“Again.” Zelik commands us to rerun the sequence from the edge of the training mat. I didn’t know he had such a bossy side.

I take a step back, settling into my starting position, and try to center myself. No way in hell am I leaving this gym without mastering the set of moves they taught me. My pride won’t let me. It’s not that different from the staff. It’s just movement and countermovement that I need to memorize. Should be easy, right? Instead, my head is foggy, I can’t focus, and apparently, I can’t keep my elbows where they are supposed to be.

Ryker is quiet as he swings his blade around in his hand and moves into position. Last night I was lying in his arms looking at the stars, blissing out. But now? He seems to have no problem annihilating me, repeatedly. His eyes are hard, focused on the sequence of moves. He is a warrior in battle, and I'm what?

We begin the form. I swing my sword, defend, attack, and defend again. I struggle to keep track of what I'm supposed to be doing, and the pounding in my head chooses this moment to take it up a notch into icepick in the brain territory. The flat of Ryker's sword hits my ribs, just below the shoulder, for what has to be the tenth time. I'm going to be black and blue after this, literally.

Frustration boils inside me and I ignore the pain in my head, forcing myself to focus. Even my eyes hurt, but I don't care. I want to learn this. I really want to be able to knock him on his ass.

Zelik interrupts my thoughts with a sharp command. "Loosen up your shoulders. Relax. You're too stiff." I do my best to follow his instructions. It's hard to let go of the tension that's been building up in my body, but I force myself to take a deep breath and loosen my muscles as I exhale.

As I take my stance, I feel the weight of the sword in my hand, and my mind clears. I take one step forward, my sword meeting Ryker's with a loud clang. Lunge. He steps back, but I follow him relentlessly, the blade flashing in the dim gym light as I bring it down in a swift, precise arc. Slash.

Ryker's blade meets mine in a shower of sparks, the force of his strike reverberating through my arms. Block. I grit my teeth and push back, driving him back with every swing.

But as we move through the sequence, I can feel my form slipping. Zelik's words echo in my head. I'm painfully aware of every mistake. My footwork is clumsy, my core unstable. My elbows droop, my shoulders tense.

Ryker sees my weakness and capitalizes on it, striking faster and harder. I barely manage to parry his attacks, my sword ringing out in protest. Sweat drips down my neck as I

try to keep up, but before I know it, Ryker knocks the sword out of my hand. He's won. Again.

"Good. That was your best one yet." Zelik nods in approval, and I can see a hint of a smile on his lips. "But you're still too stiff. You need to flow more."

Maybe I could flow more if I wasn't in the middle of a migraine that makes me feel like a buzzsaw is hacking at my skull. Shit. It hurts. I take another deep breath and try again. This time, I let my body move more freely, trying to find the rhythm of the sequence. It's like a dance, I realize. Lunge. Slash. Parry. Each step and swing of the blade has to be coordinated perfectly.

Ryker attacks again, and I counter with a quick slash. He steps back, and I use the opening to launch another attack. This time, I catch him off guard, and my blade freezes right before I would have landed a hit on his shoulder, a minor victory.

Zelik claps his hands, a proud grin spreading across his face. "That's it! You're getting it."

For a moment, I'm in control, and I feel a surge of triumph. But Ryker isn't one to stay down for long. His eyes light up with playful challenge as he counters with a swift strike. I barely block it in time, immediately off balance and on the defensive. We continue to clash, our swords ringing out in a deadly symphony.

Time slows, like it did before, and I know I'm in the zone. It's like I'm seeing everything at a fraction of normal speed. I have forever to decide what to do, to react. Every move is perfectly timed. My limbs are fluid, more precise. Power flows through me with each strike. Even in defense, I am in control, every parry graceful. As we move through the sequence, I become more confident, more in tune with the dance between me and Ryker.

Ryker swings his sword in a wide arc, and I duck under it, feeling the rush of wind as it passes over my head. I spin around, bringing my blade up to block his next attack, and then lunge forward, driving him back. He stumbles but

recovers faster than I can blink. I duck again as he swings his sword in a deadly arc.

Exhilaration courses through my veins. This is what it means to truly fight, to push my body to its limit. This is how I feel the last leg of a long race, when my body is burned out and I'm running on endorphins and pure grit. Sweat drips down my forehead, the adrenaline pumps through me. The sword in my hand feels like an extension of my body. I can see Ryker's eyes glinting with excitement as he attacks again, and —

—and... I stop. I hear nothing. I see nothing but darkness as I'm swept away to a different time and place.

Shit. Now?

I'm in the Hall of the Ancients. It seems my nightmares have started leaking into my waking hours again.

I do so love watching Ryker die over and over again.

Ryker and Octavia are kneeling in the center of the hall, fists over their hearts, the only noise the sound of the Elder as he speaks some sort of incantation in a foreign tongue.

Yes, yes. I've seen this part before. I'm assuming it's the bonding ceremony. It's the only thing that makes sense. Which means...Ryker might die soon if I can't figure out a way to stop it.

The elder officiating the ceremony stops chanting and reaches down to grab a golden ceremonial sword with a large ruby in its hilt. He lifts the blade gently with both hands and holds it in a formal display to the audience. They clap politely as Ryker and Octavia both smile.

That is the sword. I'm certain of it. The one that ends up buried in Ryker's chest.

Then, all I know is pain. It splits my skull in two.

The vision fractures as I screech in agony, using my hands to try to hold the two halves of my head together.

By the time the pain fades and the white spots clear from my vision, the scene has changed.

Panicked crowds pound on the doors, children scream as tears mar their faces. I turn in a slow circle and watch as adults all around the arena drop like flies, daggers shoved through their chests by unidentifiable attackers in the crowd.

Holy. Shit. This is way worse than I already thought it was. A large-scale planned attack? My breathing becomes rapid, and my heart runs away from me. I know this isn't real. I know it's not happening. But...but it's going to happen. I can't stop my hands from shaking, my fingers from tingling.

I spot Ryker where I know he's going to be: on the ground, bleeding out, his heart penetrated by the gaudy, ceremonial sword. Only this time, he hasn't passed out yet. He's on his knees, eyes burning with hatred and betrayal, as he stares directly into the eyes of his killer.

I can't see the killer's face. I'm too far away and he has the hood of his golden robe pulled low over his face. Ryker's murderer is a man.

Damn it. I need to get a closer look. I need to get to him! I manage a few stumbling paces before my head splits in two once more, and I collapse, shrieking. The pain is all-consuming, and by the time I regain my sense of self, the vision has changed again.

The crowd roars in joyous applause. Ryker and Octavia stand opposite one another, newfound power swirling around them—bonded. Two halves of a blissful whole.

As usual, my senses return to me one at a time. First, my hearing. Ryker and Zelik shout my name over the ringing in my ears.

Then, my sense of touch. The rough fabric of the training mat irritates the exposed skin of my arms, and a calloused hand cradles my face. There's a stinging, burning sensation demanding attention on my shoulder. A cut?

Finally, my sight. The blackness peels away to reveal Ryker's worried face over mine. Zelik kneels on my right. Fluorescent gym lights beam down relentlessly. The headache I fought before is now a full migraine. The lights overhead send shooting pain into my eyes.

"Ow...fuck." My first words, post-vision, aren't usually the most graceful.

"Dani, thank god." Ryker shudders in relief as he caresses my cheek. "Are you okay?"

Zelik wraps his hands behind his neck and sighs. "Jesus, Dani. What the hell happened? Do you have a heart issue or something?" Clearly, he is just as worried.

"I'm fine. I just need to sit up." I nod at Zelik to help, and he pushes me into a sitting position as Ryker pulls me toward him. I press my hand over my shoulder and feel the stickiness of blood under my fingers. I grunt in pain, and Ryker's eyes widen, his face draining of color.

"Ah, shit. I'm sorry." He makes a pained expression. "You, uh...went blank as I swung. Couldn't stop the blade in time."

"It's not your fault." I wave my hand dismissively.

Ryker looks like he wants to say something, but decides against it. I can tell he's beating himself up over the wound. It will heal. I'm much more concerned about what I saw.

Zelik kneels to look at the cut, gently moving my arm to see it better. "It's shallow. Should heal quickly. Hey, Ry, there's a first aid kit over in the main office—"

Ryker is on his feet and moving before Zelik even finishes his sentence.

"If I was any good at healing, I could probably take care of this myself." I joke grimly. I should be able to heal a cut like this, no problem. Maybe I should call little Klaus to take care of it. I would, too, if word wouldn't spread all over school in a matter of hours.

"Eh. Powers are overrated anyway." Zelik winks at me, and I chuckle.

“Says the guy who can what, throw lightning bolts?” I twist my lips in thought, glancing down at my seeping wound. I know almost nothing about him—aside from the light show he provided when we entered the Hall the first time—and I could use a distraction right now. “Descended from Magni, Thor’s son, right?”

He shrugs nonchalantly. “Yeah. I can’t do anything as useful as healing. I can zap people.” He wiggles his fingers as though he’s going to cast a spell, and I can’t help but laugh, even though I’m sitting on my ass and bleeding. He has a way of making people feel better. “Kind of like a walking taser. That’s about it.”

“And power the lights?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s nothing. I think Attie just asks me to do it in front of other people to make them wonder what else I can do. You know, since I’m with Ryker a lot. Like an extra protector, ravenborn plus one.”

“Well, I think that’s super cool.”

“Well, *thanks*.”

As if on cue, Ryker returns, first-aid kit in hand, and kneels next to me, gingerly examining my shoulder from multiple angles. He curses and shakes his head, apologizing once more as he pours antiseptic over the wound.

“Damn it.” The sting is not pleasant, and I hiss through clenched teeth. “That hurts way worse than it should.”

Zelik’s chuckle is laced with concern.

“Sorry.” Ryker grits his teeth. “You, um...sometimes...do that, right?” He asks, refusing to look at me, being very careful to keep his gaze locked on my shoulder while he seals the wound with butterfly bandages.

I shake my head, confused. “Do what?”

“When you’re not...here.” His eyes flicker up to meet mine, his reluctant question hanging in the air between us just like his fingers on my skin. “It happened at your prom, too. Do

you have a medical condition? Like epilepsy? You should have told us.”

Zelik’s fidgeting freezes as he hangs on every word but tries not to make it obvious.

My mouth goes cotton dry, and my nails dig into my palms. I have no idea how to respond. I know Ryker is kind. And I know I feel safe with him. But this...answering this question, especially in front of Zelik, feels too unpredictable.

What if he doesn’t believe me? No one has ever believed me before. I know the truth. I saw Ryker get hit by that truck multiple times before it happened. But is everything I see going to come true? Obviously not. I dreamed about draug before prom night, but that attack was nothing like a single dream I ever had.

And worse? One moment, Ryker and Octavia were smiling, looking happy. The next Ryker had a sword buried in his chest, children were screaming, and death was claiming people everywhere. And then everything was fine again. So, what is going on with my visions now? I’ve never seen two versions of the same event before. Ever. What does that mean?

My pounding heart screams at me to keep this vulnerable part of myself tucked away, hidden. Even from him. Another part of me refuses to give in to fear. I saw him before he was hit by that truck. I healed him. Twice. Monsters are real. Gods are real. These visions must mean something. I need to tell Ryker—I know I do. I can’t take the risk that the bad half of these visions will become reality. Doesn’t mean I want to have this discussion in front of Zelik.

“I don’t have epilepsy.” I shoot to my feet the second he’s done bandaging my shoulder. Dizzy from a combination of the headache, the injury, and standing too quickly, I resist the urge to lean into Ryker’s steadying embrace. “Thanks for patching me up.” I walk over to the edge of the mat, grabbing my bag and water bottle. “I’m going to head out. I need time to shower before class.”

Ryker takes a few steps toward me. “Dani.”

With a pointed look at Zelik, I return my gaze to Ryker and will him to understand that I will tell him what he wants to know, but not with an audience. “I’ll talk to you later. Okay?”

Zelik figures it out before Ryker does and turns around, walking away to gather our gear.

“When?” Ryker holds my gaze with a look that tells me he is going to let me delay, but not for long.

“I believe we already have a date to discuss Ms. Shaw’s essay? Tomorrow night?” He said he would help me. I’ve been to the library a couple times, but the books that discuss the Vanir war are all old, dusty, well over a thousand pages each, and sound like they were written by some old guy in a powdered, white wig a couple hundred years ago. In other words, not helpful. I don’t have a century to force my way through them.

Ryker nods, the hurt in his eyes shifting to curiosity as I back away, my nerves causing a bit too much spring in my step. “Dani, ask Klaus to heal your shoulder.”

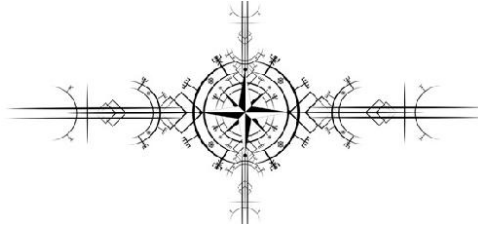
I gasp. As if. “He’s twelve.”

“He’s the best healer we have and if you don’t get it taken care of, it could get infected.”

“Fine.” That is probably true. And Klaus is very good at controlling his power. He kicks my ass in every single class. He is also sweet enough to continue to try to help me, no matter how badly I fail. I think I might be a personal challenge to him at this point.

I wave at Zelik, who is sitting on the sparring mat putting the first aid supplies back in the box, and scurry out of there.

TWENTY-SEVEN



The rest of the week passes without seeing Ryker at all. I spend most of it hanging out with Beth, watching *Criminal Minds*, doing homework, and of course, trying, and failing, to access my healing abilities in class. I called my parents, too, and gave them the “mortal friendly” version of how things have been going since I left home. Which means I lied my ass off.

I also tell them I’ll be visiting for a couple of hours tomorrow night. I have to meet Ava at midnight, but Ryker and I are going to leave earlier than I planned so we can see Isabella in the hospital and have dinner with my parents.

Holy shit, I’m taking a boy home to eat dinner with my parents.

The fact that I am really going home to find out if I’m adopted and they’ve been lying to me my entire life is just the cherry on top of my shit sundae.

With a deep sigh, I pull my backpack onto my shoulder and walk through the middle of campus towards Mr. Gauvreau’s office. I pass by students and teachers alike; their conversations buzz around me like bees in a hive. Everyone seems to enjoy the mild afternoon weather—everyone but me. All I can think about is the fact that I failed in healing class every single day this week. At this point, I don’t feel like I can glue two pieces of paper together, let alone heal that stupid piece of petri-dish skin.

Which is why I'm here. I arrive at Mr. Gauvreau's office building and take the stairs up to his floor two at a time. I show the secretary my student ID and she directs me to his office with a pleasant smile. After this morning's healing class—where we discussed the gut microbiome and I failed to help magically promote a healthy metabolism in a bacterial culture—I finally caved and asked him when I could come in for help. He has office hours every day after school, so here I am. God help me, or should I say *gods*?

I knock on Mr. Gauvreau's door, and he calls out in an enthusiastic, singsong greeting. "Come in!"

The door opens with the creak of grinding metal hinges. He sits behind his desk, papers strewn about in every direction imaginable, like fallen autumn leaves. I have no idea how deep they go, only that the actual surface of his desk is nowhere to be seen.

"Hi, Dani!" He smiles brilliantly as I walk into the pine-scented office. "I'm so glad you came. Please, take a seat."

I slump into one of the plush, padded chairs in front of Mr. Gauvreau's simple, but messy, desk, and fidget with my hands in my lap. He leans forward with a kind smile, pushing aside a pile of papers to get a better look at me.

I take a deep breath, mustering up the courage to spill my guts. "Mr. Gauvreau, I-I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm so sorry I've been failing all the class assignments. I really have been trying, and—"

"It's okay, Dani." He nods with a gentle smile. "As I said last week, learning to master your abilities takes time."

The unexpected empathy makes my eyes water, the stress and embarrassment of my time here getting to me. I feel like an utter failure. Hallucinations and visions, I'm used to. But none of my psychological issues ever made me feel stupid and inept, like his class has.

Mr. Gauvreau's eyes soften. "I think what you're having trouble with is connecting with your energy. You spent so long suppressing it, you've hidden it away, even from yourself." He

tilts his head, frowning in thought. “There might be a way I can jumpstart the connection between you and your divine essence, if you’ll let me.”

My head shoots up as I lean forward. I probably look desperate, but I don’t care. “What do you mean ‘jumpstart’?”

“I mean,” Mr. Gauvreau leans back in his chair, his fingers steepled in front of him. He stares at me for what feels like forever, weighing his words carefully. “I can use my energy to tap into yours, find your power, wherever it’s hiding, and bring it to the surface.”

“You...can?” A mixture of hope and nervousness twists my stomach, nothing so pleasant as butterflies. More like a thousand centipedes crawling around in my gut.

“Of course. I’m one of Eir’s children. Communicating with life energy is what I do.” He throws out his hands in a playful flourish. Good to know he’s enthusiastic and optimistic outside of class, in more serious situations. He’s authentically himself, which makes me trust him, perhaps more than I should.

“You can find my energy?”

“I can try. It’s completely up to you.”

I twist my hands together in my lap. The idea of Mr. Gauvreau delving into my godly energy sounds terrifying. And invasive. But at this point, I’m willing to try anything to get my powers on track.

I’m tired of looking like an idiot while sitting next to a boy who not only kicks my ass at healing, but still thinks fart jokes are funny.

Slowly, I nod my head in confirmation. “I want to do it.”

“Perfect!” He claps his hands together energetically and grins. “So, this is what’s going to happen. You’re going to sit still and relax, and I’m going to place my hands first on your shoulders, then on either side of your head. You will probably feel some sort of tingling or heat where I touch—that’s my energy moving through you.”

My heart starts racing. Why am I so nervous?

He continues his explanation. “It should only take a couple of minutes. Of course, if you ever feel uncomfortable, say the word, and we will stop.”

I try to force my shoulders to drop down from their current, tense position—up around my ears—and release the stress building in my neck muscles. “Okay, sounds good.” I am becoming such a fantastic liar. My parents would be mortified.

“Great.” He stands up and walks around his desk to stand behind me. Every muscle in my body is hard as rock. “Remember, try to relax.”

Gently, Mr. Gauvreau places his hands on my shoulders. I’m afraid my heart is going to pound out of my chest. I bite my lip, bracing, waiting to feel the tingling heat he mentioned.

Ten seconds pass. Then twenty. And I feel...absolutely nothing at all.

After about a minute and a half—I’m watching the second hand move with agonizing slowness around the clock on his wall—his hands move to my head, his palms pressed flat against my temples. Again, I feel nothing except his body heat.

For some reason, I don’t think it’s working. No energy, no magical tingling, not even the slightest hint of a tickle in my throat.

With a sigh, he removes his hands and steps around to lean his hip against his desk, facing me. His brows are furrowed, and his arms are crossed.

“So...?” My voice is shaky, and I cling to hope, despite knowing what his answer is going to be.

“It’s strange.” He tilts his head, examining me. “I feel your divine essence. In fact, it’s quite strong.”

“But?”

He stares at me like I’m a puzzle piece and he has no idea where I fit. “There’s no source.”

My heart drops to my gut. “What do you mean?”

“With everyone else I’ve searched, I can always find the source, a place inside them that acts as the focal point, the connection between their mortal body and their divine essence. A pathway, if you will.”

“I don’t understand.”

He taps one finger against his lower lip. “Imagine that you are a lamp. The lightbulb is your gift, your power.”

“Okay.”

“Your divine essence is like the electricity that turns on the light.”

When I nod, he continues.

“A lamp needs to be plugged into the electrical outlet, or you can’t turn it on. Usually, I can help my students ‘plug in’. But with you?” His pursed lips tell me he’s perplexed.

I open my mouth to ask a question, but he holds up one finger to stall me. “You are a mystery, young lady. Either your power source is hiding, or it’s somewhere I can’t access.”

“So, you know I have a gift, a light bulb, but you can’t figure out how to plug me in?”

“Exactly so. I’m sorry I can’t help. I could petition the Chamber for a more powerful member of Eir’s family to visit the school. They could send someone from the palace. Our most powerful usually serve the royal family.”

“No. That’s okay. I’ll keep trying.” No way do I want someone from the palace in my personal space, poking around inside my lampshade of a head.

“I know you will. Give yourself time. You are strong, the Gods’ Eye was right about that.”

“You know about that?”

He is chuckling now, and his amusement lightens my own dark mood considerably. “Of course. We aren’t supposed to discuss it with students, but everyone knows you turned that

old relic into a small sun. You're quite the hot topic around here."

"I'm sure everyone knows how badly I'm failing in your class, too. I don't know what to do." Pride is the only thing that keeps me from dropping my face into my hands and crying like a baby.

This sucks. Too bad I'm too old for a good, old-fashioned, throw myself on the ground, two-year-old's temper tantrum.

"Be kind to yourself. Give it time. If you don't want me to ask the family to send our most powerful healer, I'm afraid you are going to have to figure this out on your own."

"It's okay. I'm not ready to ask for that kind of help. Thanks for trying." My throat tightens, and I look at the ceiling to stop my eyes from burning. I'm literally the only student here he can't help. Of course I am. Why would all this god and magic and vision stuff start to be easy now?

"On the bright side, the difficulty you're having is probably what kept the draug from noticing you all these years. It's probably what kept you alive." He returns to the seat behind his desk and beams pure kindness in my direction. "So, as much difficulty as it's giving you now, it's also a gift. I'm going to read up on it. See if there has been another case like yours. Don't worry. We'll figure it out."

The fact that he believes I'll be okay makes me feel like I will be. "Thanks."

"Of course. I'll see you in class."

Later that night, I'm staring at the article on my laptop screen. It's one of many Ava sent. It's about Madison's disappearance on prom night. They found traces of her blood,

but no body. Probably because the draug added her to its arms and legs collection.

I wasn't a huge Madison fan, but I wouldn't wish that fate on my worst enemy. So far, I've read at least seven articles about it, interviews with her teachers, her parents, her boyfriend. They'd been together for all of two weeks. Prom has a way of making people couple up, then break up immediately after. The local press can't stop feeding the frenzy. The fact that Isabella is ranting about monsters from a hospital bed—why are they even allowing her to talk to reporters?—is not helping to calm things down.

The conspiracy theories are out there. Ava included articles from a couple of places that talk about missing people from certain family lines. One even lists the last names of everyone at the academy. The list is a couple of years old, but when I look it over, the oddly short list of surnames does look suspicious.

I thought the legacies were good at hiding their tracks, but maybe I was wrong. Or maybe a disgruntled member of their community is talking to people and saying things they shouldn't be. Telling secrets.

Damn. The list of ravenborn surnames is there as well.

Holy shit, there's Madison's last name. A student at the academy fifty years ago had the same last name? Was that student her grandmother? Great, great aunt?

Was she a legacy and didn't know it? Maybe a super diluted bloodline that didn't show any power? Why else would the draug, who supposedly only chomp legacies, gobble her up?

I'm like a bloodhound on a trail. I keep reading and absently shove another potato chip into my mouth. Crumbs fall from my fingers—again—and leave a mess of salt and shell bits on my fuzzy blanket. Damn it. The last thing I want is to invite mice to cuddle up next to me in bed because of a few loose crumbs. This building is old. I would bet money there are mice around. Or rats. Disgusting.

I sigh and leave my warm cocoon, dragging my blanket off the bed with me. I shake it out, releasing the trapped chip pieces onto the rough carpet, and vacuum them up with the handheld machine my mom insisted I bring with me.

I'll have to remember to thank her for that later. After I ask her if she's been lying to me my entire life about being adopted. As many ways as I can spin it, there's no way either one of my parents has a magical ability other than giving hugs. They are freaking awesome huggers.

A knock from the front door startles me from my cleaning. I set the vacuum down and walk over to the door, wrapping myself in my now crumb-free, fuzzy, purple blanket as I go, expecting to see Beth, because maybe she forgot her key again, or one of Beth's emo friends. I miscalculated.

Ryker stands outside of my dorm room, backpack slung over his shoulder, in a tight-fitting t-shirt and denim jeans. He takes in my disheveled appearance and grins like I just made his day. "Hey."

"What are you doing here?"

"You didn't think I would be able to wait, did you? Especially after your mysterious act yesterday morning? And you did ask me on a study date. Did you forget?" He leans one shoulder against the door frame and leans in, looking around. "Beth here?"

"No, she's with Nini." Yes, yes I forgot this was when he'd agreed to help me with my essay about the Vanir war. I said 'tomorrow,' which is now today. But then I started reading Ava's stuff and forgot about everything else.

"Perfect." He invites himself into our suite, walks straight to the sofa and plops down like he owns the place. Wait, maybe his family really does own the school. Weird.

My heart aches as he sits, patient as a saint, waiting for me to spill my guts after the disaster I made of myself this morning. I've been wanting to explain. I just...don't know how to tell him about my past, my mental health issues, and the weird split vision without him deciding I'm a lost cause.

Which, maybe I am. Lately, even my visions don't make sense.

“Hey...” He holds out one hand, inviting me closer. “Come talk to me. What’s going on with you?”

I take a couple steps toward him before peeking back over my shoulder, through my open bedroom door, to make sure there aren't any undergarments lying around. All clear.

I turn to find him watching me with a look that makes me want to run. Into his arms or as far away as I can get, I'm not exactly sure. Perhaps what I'm feeling is panic. I'm acutely aware that I've been caught in my loungewear with a fuzzy blanket wrapped around me, while he looks calm, cool, collected, and hot as hell.

I do *not* want to tell him my life history, but at this point, I don't see an honorable way out of not telling him the truth. Not if I want to continue to see him, which I do. He deserves to know what he's getting himself into.

Damn. I'm not ready to see a look of pity or doubt on his face. I like the way he looks at me now, like I'm interesting and beautiful. My hands are shaking. Stall, baby, stall. “Would you like some tea?”

He studies me for a moment, then nods. “Sure. Do you have jasmine?”

I nod and walk to the mini fridge. I throw two tea bags into mugs and bend down to grab the jug of milk.

The blanket slips off my shoulders, revealing my tank top and shorts. I feel Ryker's gaze roam over me, and my face grows hot with embarrassment.

“Did Klaus heal your shoulder?”

“Yes.” I forgot about that, too. That was soooo twelve hours ago in Mr. G's class. “He also gave me a lecture about being hurt, and told me I should focus on healing, not swords.”

“I bet that went over well.”

“He's twelve. I don't care if he healed my shoulder in three seconds flat. He's a baby. He should keep his opinions to

himself.”

Ryker chuckles and I quickly grab the milk, staring anywhere but at him. So what if he looks like he just came from an official meeting and I’m wearing pajama shorts and a tank top? That’s normal. Thank god I’m wearing a bra. I’ll just pretend it’s already summer. I’m not naked.

I *feel* naked, but maybe that has nothing to do with what I’m wearing.

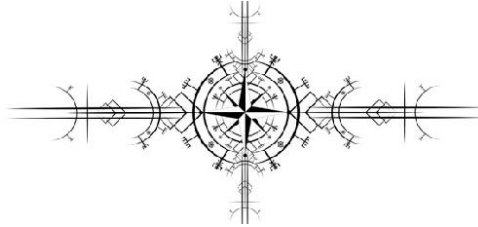
We are both silent as I wait for the water to boil. I steal a glance at Ryker, admiring his muscular arms and chiseled jawline. Even when things are awkward between us, I just want to crawl into his lap and ask him to hold me. Kiss me. I want to be with him all the time. When I’m with him, I can barely think straight. When I’m not with him, I think, a lot, and mostly about him. Is this what falling in love does to people? Turns one into a big, tangled mess?

The kettle whistles and I jump, startled out of my thoughts. I pour hot water into the mugs and hand Ryker his cup, careful not to let our fingers touch.

I join him on the small sofa and, for a few more moments, we sip our tea in silence. I appreciate the fact that he is giving me time to gather my thoughts, but the delay is not making this easier. He will either believe me or he won’t. All I can give him is the truth, my truth.

With a sigh, I get up, walk into my room and come back with my prescription pill bottles in my hands.

TWENTY-EIGHT



I stand in front of him and hold out the bottles until he sets his tea down on the small coffee table and takes them. His brow furrows as he reads the information printed on the labels. “What’s all this?”

My heart sinks and I shiver, but there’s no going back now. “Those are a few of the prescriptions I’ve taken over the years. There have been more, a lot more. I know things have changed for me since I came here, but I’m too scared to stop taking them, and even more afraid to tell you the truth.” I think about quitting, but I know it’s dangerous to stop taking this kind of medication without gradually decreasing the dose.

If I’m being honest with myself, I am terrified I’ll go into a vision in the middle of class, like I did before. I’m new here. I’m already a freak at this school, the missing legacy, the girl who almost got Ryker killed, the super powerful healer who can’t heal a paper cut. I do not need to make my weirdo factor higher by going into a trance and having visions of people dying during class.

Ryker holds up one of the bottles, looking up into my face. “Is this...an antipsychotic?” His question is gentle, and I use an equally quiet tone when answering.

“Yes.”

I sit on the coffee table, facing him. “I’m sorry I shut you out this morning. I was scared that if I told you the truth, you would see me differently. I was scared, even though you’ve been nothing but kind to me.” I lean in closer to him. His sad

eyes meet mine and I brush the hair back from his face. “But...Ryker... I don’t want to keep secrets, and I don’t want to be scared anymore. Not of you.”

Ryker’s gaze locks with mine and he leans forward until our foreheads touch. “I don’t want you to be scared. I’m not.” He shakes one of the bottles, rattling the pills around inside. “Not of this. Not of you. I care about you. You can tell me anything. Just talk to me.”

My heart swells with warmth at his words, and I feel tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “Thank you,” I whisper as he reaches up with one hand to wipe a tear from my cheek with his thumb.

Anxiety twists my insides into a pretzel. Rationally, I know Ryker is compassionate and kind. I know he is not a normal human, and that if anyone can understand my messed-up life, it’s him. But feelings don’t listen to reason, and my feelings are making my palms clammy and voice shake.

I close my eyes and grip his forearms for support. “My whole life, I’ve had...hallucinations. All-encompassing, feels-like-I’m-there, shit shows. But I don’t see normal things.”

He nods, putting the pieces together. “So, this morning, and at prom, right before the attack, were those when you had visions?”

“Yes.”

He pulls back just enough to watch me as he speaks. “What do you see when you ‘hallucinate’?”

Images flash before my eyes. Hellish, rotting monsters I thought only existed in my mind. The stench of blood seeping from infected wounds from a stab victim. A little girl, drowning in a pool. Ryker’s body, mangled and lifeless.

I bring one arm back to myself and wrap it around my torso to calm the nausea bubbling up like lava in a volcano. My face and neck go cold, and I know I must look white as a ghost, completely drained of color. “Bad things.”

“What kinds of bad things?”

Reaching out, I place my hand on his chest, digging my fingers into the muscle there to feel his pounding heart. “I watch people die. Adults. Kids. You. I’ve watched you die, Ryker, so many times.”

He stops breathing for a few seconds. “What do you mean?”

“I see things. I dream things. The draug. Murders. Accidents. I always thought they were hallucinations or nightmares. Not real. Sometimes, they were so bad I couldn’t function in the real world, and they would put me in a hospital.” I stare into his iridescent blue-gold eyes. “Until you, I thought I was crazy. I’ve watched you get hit by that truck dozens of times. I watched you bleed out on the street and die, over, and over, and over.”

His hand squeezes mine so tightly it’s almost painful. “You saw it? Before it happened?”

“More times than I can count.” I shudder, not from cold. Still, Ryker grabs the ends of my fuzzy blanket and pulls them up over my shoulders.

“How is that possible? How could you have known what was going to happen to me? Are the visions exact? Do you see the future?”

“I don’t know.” I grip the edges of the blanket and try to make him understand. “I don’t know if I see things before they happen, or if I’m causing them to happen. I don’t know if I can change them, or if the fact that you are alive is pure chance.”

“And the draug? You saw them, too?”

“I dream about them almost every night. I’ve had nightmares for as long as I can remember. They were worse when I was really young.”

I stand, waddle over to my bag, and pull out my sketchbook. My feet are as heavy as blocks of lead as I walk back over to the couch and hand it to Ryker.

“What’s this?” He opens it to the first page—dated almost ten months ago—and runs his fingers over the bone-chilling face of a roaring draug rendered in perfect detail.

“Every time I had a vision or nightmare, I would draw it. I have dozens of these sketchbooks at home, all filled cover to cover.”

His eyes snap away from the page and burn into mine. “Dozens?”

I nod and let out a half-hearted chuckle. “Why do you think I’m so good at drawing?”

He turns the pages, flipping through the images one by one. Draug, and more draug, some small and agile, some with ten pairs of arms and legs sticking out of their torso. He freezes when he reaches the first image with a red pickup truck and a faceless boy bleeding out in the street.

“Holy shit.” His entire body is frozen, and I’m not sure he’s breathing. “When was this?”

I point to the near-illegible date scribbled in the corner of the page. Seven months before his near-death experience. “You didn’t believe me?”

“No, I did, it’s just...” He flips through the images, each consecutive drawing rendered in more and more detail, until he pauses on one dated a month before the accident. His face, bloodied and unconscious, fills the entire page. “It’s different actually seeing it.”

“Believe me. I know.”

“This has happened your whole life? And no one had a clue what was really happening to you?” He shakes his head and sets the sketchbook down on the coffee table. “I’m so sorry, Dani. We failed you. It’s our fault, not yours. We should have kept better records. You’re a legacy. You never should have been trying to figure things out on your own for so long.”

“It’s not your fault. None of this is your fault.” I don’t mention Madison’s family name. As far as I know, she was an only child. There’s nothing he can do about it, and knowing would only add to the guilt he is already feeling.

“You’re with me now. I’m here, and you’re never going to be alone like that again.” He tosses the pill bottles onto the couch and cups my face with both hands.

I lean into his touch, my forehead touching his, and brace myself for what I have to say next. “There’s more.”

Ryker pulls back, concerned. “More?”

I pull his hands away from my face and pull the sketchbook into my lap. This time, I flip to the very end of the book. On the left side of the page, Ryker and Octavia stand united as the crowd explodes in applause around them, bound to one another for eternity. On the right, Ryker lies broken and bleeding on the ground with a sword shoved through his chest.

I hand it to him. “This is what I saw yesterday.”

“When you passed out?”

“Yeah.”

He examines the contrasting spreads, brows furrowed. He points to the image with the sword through his chest. “That’s the Sword of Skuld, the Norn of fate who weaves destiny.”

My heart sinks. If he recognizes it, that means the vision has some truth to it. “So that’s what it’s called.”

His face pales. “But there’s no way you’ve seen this before. The only time it’s brought out is for the bonding ceremony.”

“I’ve been dreaming about it for weeks.”

“Shit.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

He flips the page, only to find a blank one right after. “What else have you seen? Do you know what’s going to happen? Is it the Servants? After the truck and the draug attack, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Um, I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

I wince. “Every time I see this vision, it’s like I’m seeing two different possibilities: one where the bonding ceremony goes smoothly, and one where all hell breaks loose and you end up dead. I’ve never been more confused. Usually, I just

see one thing, one terrible thing, over and over. This time it's like I'm changing channels on a television screen, back and forth between the two. It's always so muddy and disjointed."

He closes the sketchbook and sets it to the side before picking up the pill bottles. "You know, taking that medication might be making it worse. Gifts as strong as yours...they don't like being suppressed. They've probably been trying to get to you the only way they can—with brute force. And they're probably part of the reason why this particular vision is so hard to decipher."

I take the bottles from him and stare, confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." He runs his fingers through his hair, sighing. "The meds are trying to block the visions, keep you from having them, right?"

"Yes."

"I bet you're getting headaches, too? Bad ones?"

"Yes. It feels like someone is shoving a knife into my skull."

"The more you try to shut the visions out, to block your divine power, the harder that power will fight to get out. You didn't just ignore the visions; you took medication that affected your brain. You were trying to shut them down completely. If these meds weren't working so hard to block them, they wouldn't need to push so hard to get your attention. They are trying to show you something you need to know. And this," he points to the sketchbook, "is *definitely* something you need to know."

"What?" I try to think back to a time before I was medicated, but I can't remember. I was too young when the "hallucinations" started. "So if I stop taking them, you think I could have more control over my visions? Figure out which version is reality?"

He shrugs. "It's worth a shot. Mortal medication always does weird things to us and our abilities."

“But weaning myself off this medication safely could take months. The bonding ceremony is a week away. There’s no way I’m going to be able to control my visions enough to figure out what happens by then.”

He frowns, deep in thought. “I’ll talk to Attie and the chamber. Convince them to double the amount of security personnel and search everyone’s bags. Maybe even get them to run a background check on everyone who will be attending. It won’t be too hard to get them to agree, not when the Servants have been getting more and more bold lately. That way, no matter what happens at the ceremony, we’ll be prepared.”

“Can you convince them not to use that sword for the ceremony? I mean, if it’s not there, it can’t happen the way I saw it. Right?”

Ryker sits quietly and I can see the gears grinding in his head as he thinks through various possibilities. “I don’t think so. Since our genetics are so diluted, we need both blood and magic to force the bond between us and a ravenborn. A long time ago, the bond occurred on its own, but that hasn’t happened in centuries. There has to be a blade of some kind there.”

“Can you delay the ceremony? Or just not go? Maybe you and Octavia could do your ceremony somewhere else?” Anywhere else. Any other time. Just not there.

He is shaking his head before I finish speaking. “No. The queen would never allow that, not based on a nightmare and a few drawings.”

“But—”

“I believe you. Doesn’t mean she will. And, I’m the first royal to graduate from Forsetta in almost fifty years. It’s a big deal. If I refuse, it would be an insult to Octavia’s family and all the ravenborn. I have to be there.”

The tightness I’ve been carrying around in my chest for weeks loosens. I’ve done what I can. I warned him and he believes me. Relief brings me to the verge of tears. “I didn’t think you would believe me.”

“Dani, you saved my life twice before. I trust you, and I believe in you. If you tell me there’s danger ahead, I’m going to take it seriously.” He grabs my hand and squeezes. “You’re even more incredible than I thought. I can’t believe you’ve gone through all this alone and survived.”

“It’s just life.” I deal with what life hands me, just like everyone else. Sometimes life gives you a warm, chocolate chip cookie, and sometimes it hands you a pile of steaming shit. I have amazing parents—cookie. I have terrifying visions—shit.

Ryker leans in close and presses his lips to mine. The kiss is so soft, as if he’s afraid I’m going to shatter and break. Cookie. Cookie. Cookie.

All too soon, he pulls away. He has his thinking face on again.

I nudge him with my shoulder. “What?”

“A gift like this doesn’t come from Eir. It’s too dark for her. You must be a mixed legacy.”

“A mixed legacy?”

“Yeah, legacies with two godly bloodlines instead of one.” He shifts his weight forward, wraps me in his arms, and pulls me onto the sofa with him. Let’s be honest, I have zero desire to protest. I’m in his arms, cozy and warm, exactly where I want to be.

“Are visions like mine common? I mean, are there others here like me?” That would be a new experience. What would it be like to talk to someone else who has visions like I do?

“Not common, but there have been a few. Usually only one power manifests, but sometimes there are mixed legacies with more than one gift.”

I cuddle into him and wrap my fuzzy blanket around my legs. “I don’t know...maybe.” Does this mean I would have more than one parent with the blood of Norse gods in their veins? For that to be true, I would have to be adopted. Wouldn’t I?

I just can't wrap my head around that possibility. I saw the pictures of my mom's big tummy when she was pregnant with me. I watched the birthing video. That scrawny, ugly, wrinkled mess was me. Right?

What if the baby in that video died, and they adopted me when I was a newborn? What if my entire life is a lie? What if my parents aren't my parents?

I need to talk to Ava. I need to go home and talk to my parents. This sucks.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, relaxing into him. Citrus, wood, and bergamot. One problem at a time. "So, if not Eir, what other bloodline could I be mixed with?"

He shrugs, making my head bounce up and back down. "My best guess is Hel, like your roommate. They're a secretive group. They keep to themselves, so no one really knows what they do. But maybe we could ask to go to one of their meetings? See if you feel...I don't know...like you belong somehow? See if you have better luck than you've been having in your healing class."

"You think they'd let me try?"

"It's worth a shot." He rubs my arm, thinking out loud. "Beth likes you. I think if we told her what was going on, she would want to help."

"Okay." I lace my fingers through his and tilt my head to get a better look at his face. "Can I ask for another favor?"

He turns toward me, our lips inches apart. "Ask."

"Remember I told Ava I would meet her?"

"Yes. I already agreed to help. So, what do you need from me? Besides my incredible company, that is."

"Well, there's Ava and Isabella, but I also need to go home and talk to my parents, find out if I'm adopted. I thought maybe you could use your truth power on them." I feel terrible, like I'm betraying my parents, but it was the best plan I could come up with.

"That's a good idea."

“How are we going to get there?”

He chuckles. “I’m going to steal Astavar’s car.” He doesn’t sound upset by the idea, not at all.

“Again? His brand new car?”

Laughter is his only answer. He is so going to get in big trouble for this.

“And you’re sure we won’t be chomped by draug when we leave?”

“I’m sure, but I recruited Zel and Octavia for protection detail. Just in case.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know he was going to ask them to come with us. “I can’t believe they agreed to go.”

He wraps his arms around me and squeezes me tight. “I can be very persuasive when I want something.” His eyes make it very clear he’s talking about me.

I can’t look away. I think I might be falling in love. Like real, grown-up, forever kind of love.

“Any chance you want to write this paper for me?” I’ve never been the kind to cheat in school, but this assignment seems worthy of an exception.

“This just keeps getting better. You are nothing but trouble, Daniella Price.” The words voice a complaint, but his grin tells a different story.

“I guess you like trouble?”

His expression changes, all hint of humor gone. “I think I’m starting to love it.”

I can’t breathe. Did he just—? No, he did not. He didn’t say it. Is he falling in love with me? I want him to kiss me, but my heart is already fluttering faster than a hummingbird’s wings. If he kisses me now, I might explode. I might not want to stop until we are naked in my bed and I’m doing something I can’t take back. I’m not ready to be that close to him, not yet.

Distraction time. “If you aren’t going to write my paper, I guess we should talk about the Vanir war.”

His shrug jostles my entire body, but I just burrow in closer and force myself to stop staring at his lips. “Forget about Ms. Shaw. I’ll give you an outline of the important facts. You don’t have time to read those old books. We have more important things to worry about.”

Hell, yes, we do. Like who I am, what other scary god’s blood runs through my veins, meeting with Ava so she’ll stop threatening to drag me out of here, finding out exactly what Isabella saw that night, and, last but not least, learning the truth about my parents. But also, I need him and his arms around me, chasing my nightmares away. “Sleep here tonight? Is that okay? I don’t want to be alone.”

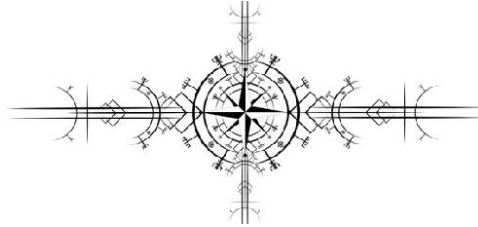
He stares at me, searching my determined face. “As you wish.”

Later that night, long after Ryker and Beth fall asleep, I open my laptop, turn on my mobile hotspot—because I’m quite sure the school isn’t above spying on every little thing we do over their wi-fi—and message Ava, confirming our meeting. I send an email to my mom asking if it’s okay if I bring some friends home for spaghetti dinner. Of course she’ll say yes. I also read what I need to know about tapering off my medication.

One by one, I open my pill bottles and count exactly how many I’ll need to take over the coming days. I may be making a mistake, not being drugged up, but I also don’t want to die of withdrawal, or suddenly decide I’d rather not exist. Talk about a violent mood swing. No, thank you.

Once I have the pills I need, I take one last look at the half full bottles and toss them, one by one, into the trash.

TWENTY-NINE



I check my new look in the mirror and meet Beth's approving stare in the glassy reflection.

"Told you. You look amazing in black." There is no hiding the smug look on her face. When she said she was going to give me a total makeover, she wasn't kidding.

She's not wrong. I look interesting, if not at all like myself. I'm wearing all black, head to toe in boots, stretchy leggings, and a long-sleeved, tight athletic shirt. I knew better, but I couldn't argue when she said she wanted to do my makeup. Now I'm covered in Beth's idea of the perfect look, queen of the Nile eyes, complete with dramatic, sweeping, black eyeliner thicker than anything I would dare myself. My blush is dark and, other than Halloween, this is the first time I've worn black lipstick.

"If I were gonna go goth, you would be my first stop." When I smile, my teeth practically glow next to the darker color around them.

"Hold that thought." Beth rushes back to her room and returns with her phone in hand, camera on. "I want pictures of my masterpiece."

I grin as she takes a couple photos, then stands next to me for the ultimate selfie. Before we finish, Nini, Beth's adorable but frightening sidekick, skips over to us. We take a few more with her in the frame. No one would ever suspect that sweet-looking, little blonde darling with ribbons in her hair of doing anything wrong. She looks like an angel, but I know she's not.

As Beth says, Nini is complicated, especially for a twelve-year-old. Then again, she is like Beth. They talk to dead people, so that would make anyone a bit different.

I give Nini a quick hug and grab Beth. She's not much of a hugger, but I sneak one in on her. "Text those to me? I want to show them to Ava."

"No problem." Her fingers fly over her phone. I wait for the notification ping from mine.

I'm scrolling through the pictures when my vision starts to fade.

Oh, shit.

I stumble over to the bed and sit down as the vision appears in my mind. I blink several times, waiting for the world around me to fade and go dark, but it never does. I'm watching two things at once. Me, on my bed, and Ryker, sneaking around in the administration building.

What is he doing?

"Dani? You okay?" Beth's question comes to me from far away and I mumble to reassure her as I watch Ryker dash across one hall and press his back flat to a wall in the next. He is definitely not supposed to be there.

But is he? Or has my mind found a brand-new trick to play on me? Nightmares and visions not enough? Add double vision to the mix?

I blink a few times and my head clears; the vision passes and it's just me seeing what's around me again. I'm a bit dizzy, but I assume, based on prior experience, that will pass quickly.

Beth is crouched in front of me, one hand on my knee. "Are you okay? What just happened?"

"I don't know." I glance from Beth to Nini. Guess there's no time like the present to tell my new friends the truth about me. "I had a vision of Ryker sneaking around outside of Astavar's office."

"You what?" Nini moves closer. "That is awesome. What was he doing?"

“Nothing. Sneaking along the wall, listening to a conversation.”

“Who was talking?” Beth asks.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t hear that well.”

Nini takes her badge off and hands it to me. “Here. Go. Check it out. Right now.”

“What? It’s the middle of the night.” I just admit to having visions and they don’t bat an eye?

Beth stands up and looks at me for a minute before answering. “She’s right. You should go find him. Besides, I wanna know who was listening in on.”

I reach for Nini’s badge. “Is it normal for legacies to have visions?” Both of them are being super nonchalant about it. Maybe it’s not as big of a deal as I think it is?

“Probably.” Beth’s shrug is not reassuring. “I never really cared about the other bloodlines. I’ve always known what I was and what I could do. The rest didn’t feel important, and we don’t go to their classes, so I have no idea.”

Nini chimes in. “Me neither!”

“You’re both very helpful.”

Beth shrugs again, unaffected by my sarcastic remark. “I try.”

I blow hair that’s fallen into my eyes out of my face. Let’s say I run over to the building, get inside and find out if Ryker is there. Then what? If he’s not there, then I just come back, a little embarrassed that I chased a vision that didn’t mean anything. No harm, no foul. And if he is there? Well, I certainly wouldn’t mind running into him in the middle of the night.

I can do this. I want to know the truth. Am I seeing things as they happen, or is it my obsession with Ryker teaming up with my messed-up head to make hallucination babies? Real, or not real? I need to know.

“Are you sure they don’t lock down the building at night? Like, deactivate all the badges?” Why I’m asking Nini instead of Beth, I’m not sure. Except, if I had to choose one of them to be sneaking around at night, my money would be on Nini.

Nini rolls her eyes. “Yes. Trust me.”

The way she says it makes me tilt my head, curious as to her level of certainty. “How do you know for sure?”

She shrugs. “I stole one of the ravenborn’s badges the week I got here. I can get in anywhere I want.”

I blink. Beth gasps. “Should I use that one? Instead of yours? I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

Nini flops back on my bed and giggles like I just asked the most ridiculous question in the history of questions. “No way. I’ll go to the office before class starts and tell them I lost mine. Besides, my stupid student badge doesn’t open the good places.”

“The good places?” Beth asks.

Rather than answer Beth’s question, Nini rolls over and reaches for my sketchbook. My instinct is to run over there and yank it out of her hands, but I don’t.

“Ooooh, you’re really good.”

“Thanks.”

Nini’s cooing has drawn Beth’s attention, and she’s looking down as Nini turns the pages while I tighten the laces on my boots. I watch their mildly interested expressions carefully, watching, gauging their reactions. I haven’t drawn a lot since I’ve been here, but the first half of the book is filled with my older nightmares, draug, and the truck that hit Ryker.

“I love this one!” Nini points her finger at one of the pages, and I walk over to see which of my violent drawings she’s admiring. It’s of the woman I watched die, shot by a mugger, and it’s admittedly one of my better displays of my artistic talent.

Of course, Nini would genuinely love a graphic image of a woman bleeding out in an alleyway. “Thanks.”

Nini flips the page. It's of the same scene, only a close-up of the woman's face.

"Oh my god." Beth sounds upset, but Nini has already turned the page to my newest creation, a detailed image of Ryker with that look in his eyes I'm so addicted to, like he wants to kiss me. "Turn it back. Turn it back."

Nini does so, but she looks as confused as I feel.

"What?" I ask.

Beth grabs the book and pulls it close. She stares for so long those damn centipedes start their crawling party in my stomach. "That's Bridget Hlinsen."

"What?" Nini sits up straight and grabs the book from Beth's hands, examining the close-up she just brushed past. "How did I miss this? They lived down the street from me. She was nice. I played at their house when I was small. She made really good cookies." Nini looks up at me and suddenly she doesn't look like a little girl. She looks like what she is—a powerful demigod with rage burning behind her eyes. "The Servants killed her."

"In an alley," Beth adds. "They left her body to the rats."

I'm going to be sick. I didn't see the rat part. "Why? I don't understand. Like her butler killed her?" I vaguely remember servants being mentioned the night I was taken to the Gods' Eye, but it's all a jumble now.

Nini crosses her arms and looks far too serious for her age. "The Servants of Seidr. They work for the Vanir. For Braelia."

"Like the Vanir I'm supposed to be writing about?"

Nini slams her open hand down on top of my bed. "Exactly. They lost the war, so now they hunt us with their draug. Cowards. All of them. I wish Odin had just killed that bitch. He should have killed her when he had the chance."

"No one has seen or heard from the gods for thousands of years. For all we know, they could all be dead." Beth is shaking her head as I digest that juicy bit of information. "Besides, she's an earth goddess. I don't think he could kill

her, even if he wanted to.” She lifts the book toward me, showing me my own artwork. “How is this possible?”

When I don’t answer immediately—because I have no clue about my visions, or the servant people they are talking about—she turns the pages and stops on one of my more detailed images of a draug staring straight up at me from the paper. As always, I wrote the date in one corner. “Dani? The date on this one is months before Mrs. Hlinsen died. Are you telling me you have visions that predict how someone’s going to die?”

Wasn’t part of the plan do a deep dive into this tonight, but I guess the cat’s out of the bag. To think I was worried about them teasing me because I drew a few pictures of Ryker. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this.”

“So, talk.” Nini is a little miss bossy pants. Sheesh.

“Everyone knows I haven’t been able to control my healing power in Mr. G’s class.”

“Old news. Get to the good stuff.” This time, Nini’s direct order makes me chuckle. She’s cute, in a homicidal kind of way.

“I also see things, dream about them before they happen. Like premonitions or something.” I shrug. “Ryker thinks I might be a mixed legacy. He suggested I ask you two if we could come to one of your... meetings? See if I there’s a chance I could be a descendant of Hel.”

Beth and Nini both stare at me like I’ve grown two heads, but I can see the wheels turning behind Beth’s shocked stare. When I look at Nini, her eyes are like glass, giving nothing away.

Finally, Beth comes to me and places one hand on my shoulder. “Mixed legacies are pretty rare, especially if they manifest more than one power.”

“He said that, too.”

Beth nods and squeezes my shoulder. “Okay, I’ll ask the others.”

“They won’t like it,” Nini says.

“I don’t care if they like it or not. Dani is my friend, and we are going to help her figure this out.” She grins. “Besides, how cool would it be if you were one of us? We’d be like sisters.”

I didn’t realize how tense I was until my shoulders sag with relief. “Thank you. I don’t know what else to do, and I’m tired of looking like an idiot, sitting next to Klaus.”

“Klaus is nice.” Nini gets off the bed and walks over to us, still flipping to what appears to be random pages in my sketchbook. When she reaches us, she holds out the book with a sly grin on her face. Ryker. Finally, the good-natured teasing I was expecting. “Someone’s in loooooove.”

I look down at Ryker’s profile and don’t bother trying to argue. “Old news.”

I leave Beth and Nini poring over my sketchbook in our tiny living room and make my way outside. It’s late and the campus is quiet. A hooting owl, singing crickets, and the breeze keep me company as I move quickly from shadow to shadow, making my way toward the main building, where I suspect Ryker is up to something.

I’m halfway there when I have to drop flat on my stomach behind a row of bushes to avoid a couple of ravenborn walking the grounds. One of them is Mirre. I cannot believe she is pushing two hundred. She looks a lot younger than Attie does. Maybe because she exercises so much in training?

Something to ask Ryker later. Maybe I can ask him tomorrow night at my house. I imagine taking his hand and leading him up the stairs to my small bedroom. I try to remember what I left hanging on the walls, but the idea of him being in my personal space is too distracting.

Maybe he’ll kiss me. Maybe we’ll lay down on my bed and do a little more than kissing. I like the way his hands feel on me. I like it a lot.

The ravenborn turn a corner, and I am halfway to my feet when I see a brand-new flash of Ryker. He’s moving along the

wall, in a crouch, like he's stalking someone and doesn't want to be seen.

Well, I was thinking about being with Ryker, but this isn't exactly what I had in mind. So, is thinking about him enough to make me see him somehow? Did I initiate the vision? Determine the subject? If so, since when can I do that?

I need to know if this is something real, or if it's another problem. If some of my visions come true, and some are pure bullshit, how am I supposed to tell the difference?

The breeze is laced with a bitter chill, whipping stray hair around my face. I need to hurry. Is he in there right now? If he is, who is he stalking? Who is he listening to and what are they talking about?

I cross the courtyard in record time and use Nini's badge to enter through a side door. I hustle through the quiet darkness of the building, my heart practically in my throat. Seems I talk a good game, but when I actually have to break the rules? Well, it's not nearly as much fun as I thought it would be.

A handful of fluorescent lights have been left on for safety purposes, which makes it far too easy for anyone looking to see me, despite the black outfit. I've only been in this building a few times, but I know my way. Attie's room is on the first floor, down the hallway, and right around the corner from Astavar's. That's where I saw Ryker, so that's where I'm going.

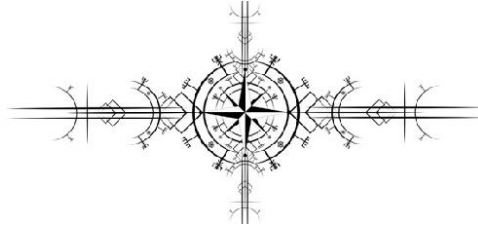
I slow my pace, not wanting to make any unnecessary sound. After a few turns, I spot Ryker exactly where I saw him, hiding behind a corner, listening to something. As I get closer, I hear voices I recognize, two distinct voices that belong to Octavia and her father. Their conversation is hushed and angry. I can't make out what they're saying from where I am, but it sounds like they're arguing about something.

I sneak up behind Ryker and tap him on the shoulder. He jumps and turns around, eyes wide with surprise and questioning, when he sees me. He opens his mouth, presumably to ask the most obvious question - *what are you*

doing here? - but gets interrupted by raised voices coming from around the corner.

“But, Dad, you’re not *listening* to me!” Octavia’s voice is frustrated and full of hurt. “I can’t be bound to Ry for the rest of my life! I refuse. I won’t do it!”

THIRTY



Octavia doesn't want to be Ryker's ravenborn?

Astavar's voice booms through the empty hall. "You can, and you will. End of discussion." If he's trying to use authority and intimidation to get Octavia to buckle, it won't work. Unfortunately for him, Octavia doesn't go down so easily—she takes after her father.

"It will be *torture*." Her voice breaks mid-sentence. It sounds like she's crying. "Dad, please..."

"This isn't up for debate, Octavia." I flinch at the aggression in his voice, and I'm not even the one it's directed at. "Get back to work."

"I've been reading that crap for ten hours. I can't even see the words anymore. I'm going to bed."

"You are not finished here."

"Yes, I am. And I am not going to bond with Ryker. I don't care what you say, you can't force me. The bond doesn't work that way." Octavia's voice is colder than I've ever heard before, even when she's talking to me. And I am pretty sure she hates me.

"Do you know how hard I've worked—how hard our family has worked—to guarantee you'll be bound to one of the most powerful families alive? And you want to throw it away because you think you're in love? You have known since you were a child that ravenborn and legacies do not mix. You allowed yourself to develop this little crush. And on a royal, no less. Ludicrous. It's time to get over your childish

infatuation and do what you were born to do. Grow up.” He lowers his voice to deliver the final, agonizing blow. “Your mother would be ashamed. We both expected better from you.”

I step forward, ready to reveal myself and go in, guns blazing, but Ryker catches my arm. He shakes his head, telling me to calm down, to remain put. I know it’s the better call—things would only get messier if they knew we were listening in—but the anger boiling under my skin says otherwise.

“You expected better from me?” Octavia shrieks in anger at her father’s condescending tone. “I’ve done *everything* you’ve ever asked of me! ‘Get good grades’, you said. ‘Stay at the top of the class’. ‘Don’t argue with you in front of other people.’ ‘Don’t disgrace the family name.’”

I can hear Octavia’s boots thud softly back and forth across the hard floor as she paces. “I am the best warrior here. I have top marks. I have never argued with you in public. But I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to spend my entire life next to someone I love but can never be with. Are you listening to me? You loved mom. You have to understand.”

“Oh, I understand. You will do what you’re told. You will serve the Forsetta family as ravenborn guardian, or you will serve no one.”

Octavia’s gasp seems way too harsh of a reaction. Isn’t that what she wants? Not to be bound to Ryker?

“And do what? Wither and die like a human?” Octavia’s whisper is pure venom.

“I will find a husband for you. You will marry. You will breed. Perhaps your daughter will appreciate the gifts her family bloodline gave her and not be so quick to throw them away over an entitled, spoiled little boy!”

“You would rob me of hundreds of years of life just because I want to be guardian to someone else?”

“No. You would be throwing away those years because you can’t control your emotions long enough to make a rational, logical choice.”

“I hate you.”

“Watch your mouth.” The hair on the back of my neck raises at the threat of violence in his voice.

There’s a moment of tense silence between the two of them, the air so thick with resentment and anger I could probably slice it with a knife. I shouldn’t be listening to this. It feels wrong, like the acidic words are burning my skin and burrowing down to the bone.

Just when I think the conversation is over, Octavia decides to pour some fuel on the fire. “Nothing I do is ever good enough for you, not since mom died. You are furious with mom for dying the way she did. You’ve been taking your anger out on me for years. It’s not my fault she’s dead.”

“Watch. Your. Mouth.” Astavar’s voice is what I imagine death incarnate sounds like.

My heart climbs up my throat when Octavia continues to argue. “Why? She’s dead. Thank the gods. Because if she was still here, she’d be ashamed of who you’ve become. Not me. You.”

A sharp slap echoes through the halls, followed by deafening silence. I glance up at Ryker. His lips are tightly pursed, and his jaw is clenched in barely repressed fury, but there’s none of the surprise I’m feeling in his eyes. It’s almost as though he knew Astavar would hit her.

“This discussion is over.” Astavar walks down the hallway, away from us.

I peek around the corner to see Octavia watching his back, one hand cradling her cheek, silent tears sliding down her cheeks. She’s not breaking down like I would be. She’s even stronger than I thought. No wonder they want her to be Ryker’s protector.

Ryker grabs my arm and pushes me in the opposite direction. “Go! Go!” He whispers as quietly as possible.

I stumble in the direction he wants to go, my mind still reeling from what we just heard. I catch a glimpse of her

reflection in one of the windows. She's still standing there, like a statue.

A side door slams somewhere as Astavar leaves the building. Ryker gives me a little nudge to get me moving faster, even though I want nothing more than to follow that jerk and show Astavar exactly what I've been learning in training these last few weeks.

But Ryker is right. We need to go. Now.

We hurry down the hallway, our steps silent as we disappear into the shadows. I run in a crouch, head down, straight to Astavar's office. My heart pounds in my chest, fury and frustration boiling inside me, threatening to spill out as we slip inside and close the door.

Ryker presses his ear to the door, listening. He lifts his head and looks suspicious. "How did you know I was here?"

"How could he do that?" I hiss, my voice low and angry, completely ignoring his question. "How could he hit her like that?"

Ryker shakes his head. "It's not the first time. Trust me."

My eyes widen in disbelief. "What? How long has this been going on?"

He doesn't answer right away, his gaze flickering to the ground. "Since her mother died our second year here. He hasn't been the same since."

"Why doesn't someone do something?"

"I've tried, believe me. Her family is too powerful. They want him here as head of the school, and my mother doesn't care."

"What do you mean? She's the queen, right? Can't she, I don't know, fire him and find a new home for Octavia? Like a foster family?"

Ryker's eyes are grim. "You don't know what it's like once we graduate."

"Then tell me."

“Most of the adult legacies have a good relationship with their ravenborn. They’re friends, some of them are even closer than family.”

“But?”

“But there are some who follow the old ways.”

Do I have to pull it out of him one sentence at a time?
“That means nothing to me, remember? Just tell me.”

He sighs and moves away to rummage through the drawers in Astavar’s desk.

How did I completely forget the reason I came here? I had a vision. I saw Ryker in this building. Why? What is Ryker doing sneaking around the administration building in the middle of the night? “What are you looking for?”

“The spare keys.” He glances up at me and I see a happy twinkle in his eye. “We need to steal his car to get out of here, remember?”

I know I asked him to, but I wasn’t sure he would follow through. Steal the brand new car Attie gave to Astavar after Ryker totaled his old one? “You’re crazy, you know that?”

“Says the woman who looks like Cleopatra’s evil twin.”

I snort. He’s so right. “Touché. Beth was giving me a make-over.”

I move to the first wall of shelves lined with antiques, ancient weapons, and books about everything I can imagine and then some. No way in hell I believe Astavar has read all of them. I’m guessing they’re for show.

We search in silence for a few minutes, but the question is brewing. “Ryker, please tell me. What’s the problem after we graduate?”

He shoves what looks like a particularly heavy chest aside to reveal a small safe in the wall. “Gotcha.” Ryker cracks his knuckles and crouches down in front of it. “I knew he was going to try to hide you, old friend. I bet he changed your combination, too.”

Ryker holds his hand, palm out, over the safe's touchpad. I watch, shocked, when his hand starts to glow. There is a small flash of light, and then Ryker is pushing numbers. When he's done, the door to the safe swings invitingly open.

“How did you do that?”

“Baldur is the god of truth, among other things. Not much of a power outside of politics, but sometimes it comes in handy, like when I need to know the true and correct set of numbers to open a safe.” He reaches inside and pulls out Astavar's car fob.

“You could be a bank robber if all this demigod stuff doesn't work out.”

He chuckles, moving the chest back into place as I move away. “I've thought about it. All I would need is someone's name, what bank they're with, and a computer. But why would I bother when I can just pick stocks? Or invest in companies I know will succeed?”

His words sink in, and I have to pick my jaw up off the floor. That's just wrong. Being mortal really isn't fair.

My shoulder hits the door and I hold his stare. He is not leaving this room until he answers my question.

“Now that you have what you came for, tell me what you don't want to tell me. What's the problem after graduation?”

“Right after you tell me how you knew I was here.”

He comes toward me and leans in close, placing his arms on either side of my head. I don't feel threatened, I feel like tearing his shirt off. Kissing is good, right? Whatever is going on with his—our—people, it can wait a few hours, right? It's not like the situation is going to change.

“Well?”

I clear my throat. “I saw you. I was sitting there with Beth and Nini, and I saw you.”

“While you were awake?” He is staring at my lips.

“Yes. Your turn.”

“You ask a lot of complicated questions.”

“It’s one of my superpowers.”

His smile makes me lean in. I expect a kiss but am met with his whisper instead. “The problem is, no one truly knows how powerful a ravenborn is going to be until after the bonding ceremony.”

“When their power is activated by the person, I mean legacy, they bond to?”

“Yes. Most of the time, the bloodlines run true, like Octavia’s. There has never been a weak ravenborn in her family, at least not that I know of.” His gaze traces my face and lands on my mouth. “Your lips are black.”

“Did you forget what I said? Beth did my make-up.”

“That would explain the color scheme.” He moves in close enough to nuzzle my neck. “I had no idea I could be attracted to a goth girl, but you look dangerous.” His lips make contact with the side of my neck—where there’s no make-up—and a shiver runs through me. We should be running for our lives, getting as far away from Astavar’s office as possible. Instead, we’re going to make out in the dark? This is a *terrible* idea. I should hate this idea. I don’t.

His lips claim mine and I no longer care. I wrap my arms around him and cling, melt into him. His heat is like a drug and all I can think about is more, more, more.

His hands spread across my back like a blanket, holding me in place as his lips trace a path from my lips, across my cheek, down the side of my jaw to my neck. I rest my head against the wall and lean back to give him better access. When he nibbles along my collarbone, a shudder races through me and I lift my legs to wrap them around his hips like I’ve seen women do in the movies.

It’s soooo much better in real life.

He lifts his head to kiss me again and I bury my hands in his hair as he presses my back against the wall so hard I can feel the outline of the wood panel. There is nothing in the world right now but him and me and this connection.

I moan in protest when he lifts his head and stares into my eyes. I am more than a little thrilled that he is breathing at least as hard as I am. I feel like I just ran a sprint, but my body is on fire for more.

“We have to get out of here.”

Focus, Dani. He is so right, but we have unfinished business. “What happens if the ravenborn is weak?” My voice sounds strange, wobbly, like I can’t keep my diaphragm from shaking. Screw that, my entire body is shaking.

I unwind my legs from around his hips and lower my feet to the floor, but I don’t look away. What constitutes weak with these people? Ryker already said they don’t have wings anymore, but what? Is it okay if they can summon a weapon, but no armor? Do they get their armor in pieces, like maybe one of them can summon armor for their arms but not their legs? “I don’t understand.”

“Do you know the only way to break the bond, after the ceremony?”

“Death. The bond can’t be broken unless one of them dies.”

“Yes.” He slides one hand down my side and around my hip, pulling me closer.

God, he smells good. “So?”

“Think about it. The most powerful legacy families want their children to bond with the most powerful ravenborn. It gives their families the best chance of holding onto their godly powers over time and ensures that their children will be properly protected and live long enough to bring new legacies into the world.”

“So, what happens when a ravenborn isn’t as powerful as they thought?”

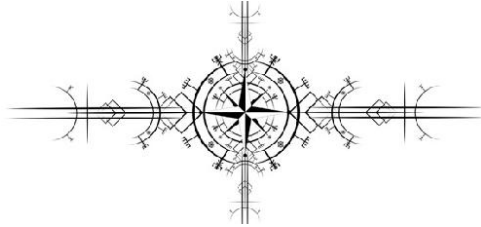
“I don’t know what happens to them for sure. Some disappear and their legacy only knows they are dead because they feel the bond break. Others die in random accidents. There is no proof, no evidence. There is never enough suspicion to spark an investigation.” The resignation I see in

his eyes steals the last of my Ryker induced haze and I feel sick to my stomach. “I can’t prove anything yet. But when I’m king, I will get to the bottom of it. It’s one of the things my mother and I argue about.”

“You believe the weak ones are murdered, don’t you?” Somehow, it’s easier to say it in the dark. It’s disgusting and wrong, but it makes sense in a very evil, twisted way.

Before he can answer, the door swings open, hitting Ryker in the back. The overhead light comes on, making me squint in protest, and Astavar walks in with Octavia on his heels.

THIRTY-ONE



What the hell is Astavar doing here? And why is Octavia with him? She should be halfway to another country by now. The only thing I would want after an argument like that would be to get as far away from that asshole as possible and never come back.

We are lucky the door remains open, mostly hiding our presence. Ryker has gone completely still. I am trying my best, but between his kisses and discussion of murdering the ravenborn, the adrenaline running through my body is not cooperating with the ‘hold perfectly still’ plan. There is just enough of an angle for me to peek around Ryker’s shoulder. I’m holding my breath. I’m afraid I’ll make too much noise if I try to let any air out.

I hope they get the hell out of here as quickly as possible.

Astavar disappears from view. I assume he is walking to one of the shelves to get a book. He returns with a black, leather-bound tome with a dry, cracked cover—the book looks old as dirt—with no title on the spine. “Read this. Before the ceremony.”

Octavia is silent as he drops the book in her arms and turns to leave. She turns with him, and our eyes connect.

She freezes, her gaze taking in the situation in the blink of an eye. Me, staring out at her from behind Ryker’s body. Ryker with his arms around me and my back pressed to the wall. It’s not difficult to figure out what we were doing when they walked in.

I know my eyes are begging her to keep her mouth shut. Her father is already gone. He walked out the door without a second glance in our direction.

“Octavia, I don’t have all night.” Astavar’s irritated voice carries from the hall, breaking the hypnotic connection between us.

She averts her gaze and stumbles after him, carrying the heavy book. “Sorry. I’m coming.”

She follows him out, turns off the light and closes the door behind her. The click of the lock falling into place seems ironic now. We’re already inside. Now I’m worried we won’t be able to get out.

We don’t move for what feels like hours but is no more than a minute. Ryker steps back and takes my hand.

His whisper is barely audible. “That was close. We need to get out of here.”

No kidding.

I sigh in relief when the door opens. We race through the dark hallways, avoiding the path to the parking lot and Astavar’s car. Exhilaration floods me as he opens a side door and we slip out into the darkness, free. He doesn’t let go, leading me through a maze of twisted shrubbery and shadows. When he finally stops, we are back in his secret garden, the one with the giant Valkyrie who looks like she wants to murder both of us for invading her space.

I bend down and put my hands on my knees as we smile at one another and catch our breaths. His lips are black, and he has black eyeliner smudges all over his cheeks where I rubbed my face against his. How can he look handsome in smeared makeup? I don’t know, but he does. He so does. “That was fun.”

He doesn’t just smile, he laughs. “Your eyeliner needs repair and your lips are a dull grey. You look like a zombie.”

“That’s because I gave all my black lipstick to you.” I know my smile is a bit smug and a lot flirty. He just grins and uses his sleeve to scrub my lipstick off his face.

I watch for a moment as the reality of events settles around me like a cold, damp blanket. “Octavia saw us.”

He freezes, hand halfway across his lip, and his eyes dart to mine. “You’re sure.”

“I’m sure. She was staring, which was why Astavar told her to hurry.”

“Guess I’ll have to talk to her about everything tomorrow. I don’t want to force her into a bond she doesn’t want. I can find someone else. I don’t want to be the reason she’s miserable her entire life.”

“You care about her.” I tell myself not to be jealous, but part of me, a very selfish part, wants him all to myself. But I know he had a life before me. He has friends and family he cares about, just like I do. I will never want to take that away from him, even if it means I have to learn how to put up with Octavia’s scowl.

He looks at me in a way that makes my insides melt. “Yes. I love her. We’ve been close for as long as I can remember. Octavia and Zel are my family, my best friends.” He walks toward me and that fast I’m in his arms again. “But I’m not in love with her. I don’t lie awake at night thinking about kissing her. Like I think about you.”

I stare up into his eyes and shake my head. Who says things like that? Perfect, romantic, heart-melting things like that? “I can’t believe you’re real.”

“You have no idea how many times I’ve thought the exact same thing about you.”

A flash of moonlight from the statue’s sword catches my eye and my mind snaps back into full functionality. “What happened to Octavia’s mom? You said she was strong. Did your mother want someone else? Did your people kill her to break the bond?” I hate asking, but the question won’t go away.

He looks at me without seeing and I am more than a little relieved he’s not angry at me for implying his mother is a cold-blooded killer. He tells me he loses sleep thinking about

kissing me, and I accuse his mother of murder. Am I an idiot or what?

“No. Her death shocked all of us. She was a very powerful ravenborn. They were together for decades. My mother often told me Delilah was her closest friend and advisor. My mother was crushed. After the attack, she didn’t come out of her room for a week.”

“But *how* did she die?”

“Draug attack. It was an ambush. They were after my mother.” The weight of his words hits my chest like a sledgehammer, and then he makes it worse. “Octavia shut down. Before her mom died, she was always laughing and pulling pranks on the rest of us. After, she barely spoke for months. Astavar was already at the academy. He went from annoying to unbearable. Octavia threw herself into her training. She was obsessed. Swords, knives, the staff. She can throw daggers into a rabbit’s eye from across the field. She works harder than anyone I’ve ever seen. But she’s driven by fear.”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and his gaze doesn’t have that blank, focused on something in another time and place, look. No. All his attention is on me as he explains.

“Fear that she will fail. Fear that I’ll be killed. Fear is like a beast inside her, eating her alive. Zel and I couldn’t take it. That’s why we started training.”

“So she wouldn’t feel like you were so vulnerable?”

“Yes.”

“Other legacies don’t train?”

“Not usually, unless they have an offensive ability, like Zel. Can you imagine Klaus or Nini with a sword?” He seems to be amused by the idea, but I think about them, and my immediate answer is yes. Yes, I can.

“Seems like it would be smart to teach all the legacies how to defend themselves. I mean, the draug are after us, not the ravenborn. What if you’re out somewhere alone and one of them finds you? Like prom night?”

He sighs, all amusement gone. “That never should have happened. I was breaking every rule to be with you that night. I wish I could tell you I regret it, but I’d be lying.” He looks away, then back at me, and I see vulnerability in his eyes. “Do you? Regret it, I mean? Theoretically, you could have lived your whole life and never had to deal with any of this.”

“No. I have no regrets.” At least not yet. I know he cares about Octavia. They’ve been close friends their entire lives. Ryker is dealing with emotions I can barely fathom.

I give him a soft kiss and take his hand. “Come on. It’s late. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“We do.” He holds up the key fob and wiggles it in the air.

We move like shadows across campus. As usual, my heart wants to relax and enjoy the moment, but my head is still racing with questions. “What did Octavia mean when she said he would be robbing her of hundreds of years of life?”

He squeezes my hand. “I keep forgetting how much you don’t know about us.”

“Then tell me.”

“When a legacy and ravenborn are bound, the ravenborn’s dormant power activates. Some of them, depending on the family bloodline, are even stronger than we are.”

“So?”

“We can draw on our ravenborn’s power to amplify our abilities, and they can use ours, which is really important, especially if they need weapons or extra energy during a fight.”

“Where does the hundreds of years part fit in?”

“Something about the blend of power slows our aging. Bonded pairs can live two or three hundred years. A Forsetta royal, me, and a ravenborn from Octavia’s line would be very powerful. If Octavia’s mother hadn’t been killed, they would have lived at least two hundred years. Probably closer to three.”

“What?” I stop walking, forcing him to either let go of my hand or wait for me to get my ass moving. “You said I’m powerful. As powerful as a royal?”

“More powerful at the moment. Once we are bonded to our ravenborn, part of our abilities will depend on how strong they are.”

“Are you telling me I’m going to live three hundred years?”

“Yes, as long as you choose a ravenborn with a modicum of power and complete the bond.”

Holy fucking shit. I need to get my ass back over to their side of campus and start meeting more people. Assuming I can figure out how to turn on my powers, if I can find a ravenborn I like, I’ll be magical and immortal? Like, for real? “How old is your mother?”

“Seventy-seven, but she looks about thirty.”

“Attie?”

This time he chuckles and I’m anxious to hear the answer. This one’s going to be good; I can just tell. “Attie and Mirre are a hundred and eighty-four.”

Oh my god. She looks old, like in her sixties, maybe? But she’s actually almost two hundred? And Mirre looks like she’s at least a decade younger.

“So Mirre came here with Attie?”

“Yes. They actually live in the royal compound with my mother.”

That totally makes sense. Old, powerful, and bad ass. Of course, Attie would have a kick-ass protector. “You? How old are you?”

He lifts one hand to cradle my cheek and I lean into him automatically. “I’m eighteen, like you. The aging thing doesn’t happen until after we bond with a ravenborn.”

“But your mom—” I do some quick mental math. “She had you when she was almost sixty?”

He shrugs and tugs on my hand. I take the hint and start walking.

“She’s still young enough to have more children. The Chamber is pestering her to remarry and get pregnant. They’re relentless. She hates it.”

“Why? Why are they pushing her like that?”

“Because if she doesn’t have more children, I’ll be the last one, the last living descendant of Forseti.”

I can’t believe we are standing here, in the dark, in the middle of the night, talking about this, while I have smudged makeup and he’s wearing at least half my lipstick. “But you could have kids, right? Then there would be more.”

He freezes in place, everything about him completely still, except his thumb, which is stroking the inside of my wrist as I wait for him to start moving. “Do you want to have children?”

My turn to freeze. Isn’t it a little early in our relationship to be having this conversation? Maybe. On the other hand, we aren’t quite kids anymore either. If having children is a deal breaker for him, I guess he’s smart to ask the question early on.

I close my eyes. I don’t want to see his reaction to my answer. “To be honest, I don’t know.” When I thought I would pass on the genetics for a host of psychological disorders and mental illness? No. I wasn’t too keen on having children. But now?

I imagine having a family with Ryker, chasing around adorable, dark-haired babies with dimples, and superpowers. Not gonna lie, I know I’ll be tempted if this thing between us turns into something serious. White dress, a ring, and walking down the aisle serious.

What the hell am I doing, thinking about marriage and kids? We’ve known each other for what, a month? That’s the definition of crazy.

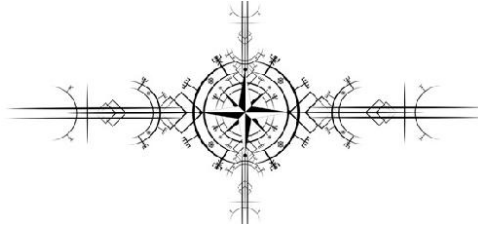
We make it to my dorm without either of us saying another word. I have no idea what to say after that. I guess he doesn’t

either, because when we get inside, he turns me in his arms and lowers his head. I stand on tiptoe to meet him halfway.

This kiss is slower, gentler than I expect. This kiss isn't about sex.

A shiver races over my skin as I realize what *this* kiss feels like. It feels like love.

THIRTY-TWO



The smell of disinfectant, dirty diapers, and sour body odor hangs in the air like a heavy fog as I walk down the hall to Isabella’s room in the nursing facility. Ava did some digging for me, and it turns out the doctors decided Isabella was stable enough to check out of suicide watch on the secure floor of the hospital, but not quite grounded enough to go home. So she ended up here, the place like a halfway house for sick people, the elderly, and patients who don’t have help at home, all because she’s convinced Madison “disappeared” into the mouth of a monster on prom night. The sign outside said it is a rehabilitation facility.

Looks—and smells—like hell on earth to me.

I hug the big yellow teddy bear I bought for Isabella close to my chest and wonder what the hell I’m doing here. Isabella and I are not friends. But she told the police, and anyone who would listen, that she saw something terrible that night. Like it or not, there is a dark, broken piece of my soul that feels sorry for her. I know exactly how she must be feeling, abandoned and alone, terrified of something she doesn’t understand, and worst of all, the hopelessness of believing something with your whole heart and having everyone look you in the eye and tell you that you’re losing your mind.

Ryker, Zelik, and Octavia are waiting outside in the hospital parking lot. We took Astavar’s car, literally walked to the parking lot in broad daylight, got in, and drove away. No one but the guards noticed we were leaving, but when Mirre waved us through, the rest didn’t even blink.

I don't know what Attie's agenda is, but when Ryker decided to go to her for help, not only did she laugh when she found out Ryker was going to 'borrow' Astavar's brand new car, she convinced Mirre to let us go.

I stop in front of door 327 and knock softly. Someone calls out for me to enter, so I take a deep breath and walk in with a smile I hope doesn't look as fake as it feels.

Isabella sits in a chair near the window, her attention focused on something outside. Her normally gorgeous hair is pulled back into a messy ponytail, her face is bare of makeup—I've never seen her without the mask—and she's wearing a fuzzy jumper set I would buy for my grandmother.

"Hi."

Isabella turns her head, blinks like she's seeing a ghost, and turns back to the window. What is she looking at? I glance outside, but all I see is some blond guy with a crooked nose standing on the sidewalk in gray sweatpants and a hoodie trying to act like he's not staring back at her.

I guess Isabella's hit that point where boredom makes you people watch.

"Isabella? I brought this for you." I approach slowly and place the teddy bear in her lap. She looks down as if she's surprised and slowly wraps her arms around him. "I got the softest one I could find. I hope it's okay."

She stares at the bear for a minute, then looks up at me, her eyes focusing for the first time. "Dani? What are you doing here?"

I shrug. "I just wanted to check on you. Make sure you're okay."

She scoffs but squeezes the bear as if she's afraid I am going to take it back. "Are you here to laugh at me? Make fun of me for all the times I said terrible things about you?"

It's my turn to scoff. "No." I sit down in a second chair made of black metal and hard plastic. This one is obviously for visitors, and they don't seem to want anyone to stay long. This thing will make my ass numb in five minutes flat. "I know

how hard it is when no one believes you. I guess I just didn't want you to feel like you're alone."

She bites her lower lip and wipes a tear from one cheek. I rummage around on a small bedside table for a tissue and hand it to her.

"Thanks." She studies me, her eyes full of regret. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for every horrible thing I ever said to you."

"It's okay." She was cruel for years, her taunts at school hurtful and full of ignorance. I look at her now, sad and broken, and I can't hold on to the smallest sliver of anger or spite. My world is too big for that now. Her opinion of me is completely irrelevant. "Have they—" I'm not sure how to ask this.

"Have they found Madi? No. I keep telling them they're not going to. That thing wrapped around her and sucked her inside." Her eyes are glossy and filled with desperation. "No one believes me, but it was a monster, or an alien. Something horrible. It ate her alive."

A chill races over my skin and I shiver like it's the dead of winter. I know exactly what she's talking about, but I can't tell her about the draug, can't tell her I've seen one, smelled its rotten stench. I *really* can't tell her that her best friend is dead because I met Ryker and asked him to prom.

I learned a long time ago that the 'what-if' game is a never-ending spiral into despair. What if none of this happened, and I never met Ryker, and Madison was still alive? What if I hadn't kissed him, and he hadn't been out alone, or the draug weren't close enough to find him? Madison is dead, and I can't tell her best friend the truth.

There is literally nothing I can say to make this right. "I'm so sorry."

"Me, too. I never should have asked her to go outside with me."

"It's not your fault."

When she doesn't respond, I change the subject. "What do the police say? Do they have any leads?"

Isabella shakes her head. “I told them what happened, but they don’t believe me. My parents think my mind is broken from the trauma of Madi’s ‘disappearance’. The doctor keeps shoving new pills at me like they’re candy. None of them help. The nightmares are terrible. I can’t stop seeing that thing, in here.” She pauses to tap the side of her head and leans closer before whispering the last. “How do I get out of here? I want to go home, but they won’t let me.”

This is one question I can answer. “Accept the fact that they will never believe you and tell them what they want to hear. Tell them you were confused, that it’s all a blur and you can’t remember anything that happened after you went outside.”

“Lie?”

“Yes.”

“But why? Why won’t they listen? Why won’t anyone believe me?” She leans back in her recliner and turns her head so she can look out the window again.

I feel like I’m being dismissed, so I stand up, not sure how to extricate myself from this awkward situation. Her last statement, however, is going to haunt me forever if I don’t say something. “Isabella?”

I wait for her to turn around and look me in the eye.

“I believe you.”

She says nothing, turning away before I can walk out of the room.

“Oh, wonderful. Come in. Come in. I’m so excited to meet Dani’s friends.” Mom has her arm around me—she hasn’t let go since I walked in—as Dad herds Ryker, Octavia and Zelik toward our smallish kitchen. He’s asking their names on the

way. The smell of garlic bread and marinara is like a drug and I soak it in, pretty sure I'll never get enough.

A loud bark is the only warning they get before Hermes explodes into the room, with his usual happy energy, and plows into my legs. Of course, I crouch down and give him a proper hug. God I've missed him.

"Hey boy, I'm glad to see you, too." His tail makes a loud thump every time it hits the wall. That must hurt, but he doesn't stop. His big, brown, dopey eyes are pure love as he looks at me like I'm the best human on the planet, even though I know the second our interlude is over, he'll be on my dad's heels the rest of the night. "I missed you, Hermes. You're such a good boy."

I'm kissing the top of the big dog's head when Ryker asks my dad a question.

"Your dog's name is Hermes? Like the Greek god?"

I'm sure one of our guests will have something to say about that later.

They disappear into the kitchen and Mom wraps me up in the undeniably best hug on the planet. "They seem so nice. I'm so happy to see you. How are you? How is school?"

"It's good."

"That's it? That's all I get?" She gives up on that quickly. "That dark-haired boy?"

"Ryker?"

"Yes. I saw the way he was looking at you. Is he your boyfriend?"

I can feel my face turning three shades of pink. I don't talk about my love life with my mother, but then again, I've never had a love life to talk about. "No. We're just friends."

"Well, he's cute. I approve. As long as he's nice. And not too old."

"He's amazing, Mom. And he's the same age as me." I wish he was, officially, mine, but we haven't had that

conversation and I don't dare assume.

She waggles her eyebrows at me as we join the rest of the group in the kitchen. Our dinner table will only seat six, but I have one more guest coming.

The doorbell rings. Hermes barks and runs for the front door like he's still racing. I'm right behind him.

I throw the door open, squeal, and practically leap on my best friend. "Ava!" We hug, give each other the once over, and the look—the *we'll-talk-about-everything-later* look—as I put my arm through hers.

Mom walks over and greets Ava with a brilliant smile and a bone-crushing hug. "Ava, it's so good to see you!"

"Likewise, Mrs. Price." Ava's face is red with embarrassment, but I know she secretly likes the affection.

"I've missed my girls." Mom grabs my shoulder with one hand and Ava's with the other, and leans back so she can see us both with ease. "I can't wait to see you two in your caps and gowns! You guys are going to be *adorable!*"

She brings us both in for another hug, my cheek squishing in against hers. Ava's words sound muffled from her similarly squished position on Mom's other shoulder. "So adorable."

Caps and gowns? Oh, shit. I almost forgot about that. Worrying about whether I'll graduate high school was so three weeks ago. Will the Academy even let me go to graduation with the rest of my classmates at West with the Servants becoming more active? Then again, I have a feeling I could do anything with the support of Attie and Ryker and a legion of ravenborn.

"Come on! Your food is gonna go cold!" Dad's shout breaks us out of our sentimental reunion.

"Coming!" I put my arm through Ava's and lead her into the kitchen. Mom follows after us.

Dad has already squeezed another folding chair around one end of the table. The tablecloth is gingham, the plates are chipped, the refrigerator is covered with photos, sticky notes

with reminders written on them, and a couple of crinkled crayon drawings that I made for Mother's Day in second grade.

I miss this place, and this safe, simple life.

Ava greets Ryker, whom she met at prom, and I introduce Octavia and Zelik before we all dig in. I am worried they won't like the food, but they all eat like they haven't been fed for a week. Which makes my dad beam like a master chef.

As soon as the plates are cleared, we migrate to the family room where phase two of this plan, also known as Ryker asking my parents to see my baby pictures. I am supposed to act embarrassed, which isn't difficult because I actually am. Who wants the hottest guy at school to see pictures of a scrawny two-year-old in a diaper, a pair of her dad's work boots, and nothing else?

I used to love stomping around in those boots.

In no time at all everyone is chatting and laughing. Even Octavia seems to be enjoying the let's-embarrass-Dani-show. Ryker hands a photo album back to my mom and gives her one of his melt-my-heart smiles. "What about when she was first born? You know, when she was all red and wrinkled?"

My mother is thrilled. "I can't believe you want to see those, too. I was afraid we were already showing you too much." She glances at me for confirmation of this statement, but I shrug rather than protest. She watches me for a moment, making sure I'm truly all right with her showing them more. "I'll be right back."

Every muscle in my body goes tight when she returns carrying an oversized photo album trimmed with white lace. It's hideous, and old. She told me her great aunt gave it to her at the baby shower, so she had to use it.

Mom comes over to the sofa and I scoot over so she can sit between Ryker and me. My dad has his feet up on his recliner with Hermes draped over his lap like a blanket. Octavia and Zelik move to stand behind the sofa so they can look over Mom's shoulder.

She opens the book and there I am, fresh out of the oven and ugly as hell. I don't care what anyone says. Brand new babies look like aliens with big eyes and no hair. Not cute. Newborn me is no exception. Next to the hospital provided photo of my scrunched-up, pink face below a tiny knit cap, is the plastic hospital tag from my wrist, 'Baby Price' and the date still easy to read.

I don't know what to say, but the baby looks like me. At least I think it does. Same angle on the chin, same shape of the lips, same eyes. Mom is slowly turning pages, adding a bit of commentary here and there. I know Ryker is planning to pull out his truth detector powers and find out if my entire life has been a lie.

I clear my throat and lean back into the sofa cushion. "I don't know, Mom. That baby doesn't even look like me. Are you sure I'm not adopted?"

Ava, who has already seen every baby picture in the house, freezes from her perch on the oversized ottoman, where she had been cooing at Hermes in an unsuccessful attempt to lure him away from his favorite human. When I ask the question, it's like I pushed the pause button on the universe as we all wait for her answer.

Mom laughs. She laughs and something inside me settles back into its rightful place. "Oh no, honey. That's you all right. In fact, I can even tell you the exact date and time you were conceived."

My dad clears his throat, but either she doesn't hear him, or she ignores the subtle interruption. I can't decide if I want to hear this story or not. The idea of my parents having sex? Gross.

"Your father had a race that weekend and it was a ten-hour drive. Our car broke down just outside this little town in Kansas. The town was so small it didn't even have a hotel. So we had to—"

"I think that's enough." Dad interrupts. Thank god, because I've decided this is information I do not need to know.

Like ever. “Poor Dani is already embarrassed. I don’t think these kids need to hear the nitty-gritty details.”

My mom is still laughing at us when she gets up to put all the photo albums away. Dad has melted into his recliner, one hand absently petting Hermes. I look at Ryker and raise my eyebrows. Well?

He nods subtly, confirming she was being truthful.

I hop to my feet, so happy and relieved that I want to jump up and down and scream. “I’m going to take them upstairs and show them my room.”

My mother’s voice calls out from the back of the house. “Sorry about the mess in there!”

Mess? What?

Feeling like a mother hen being followed by a line of chicks, I lead my guests up the stairs to my bedroom and open the door. When I don’t walk in, Ava pokes her head over my shoulder to take in the disaster zone.

“Looks like your mom took up sewing.” Rolls of fabric are everywhere. More has been rolled out, paper patterns attached with straight pins. Some of the pieces are cut and ready, most are not. There are needles, scissors and strange pens scattered across the bed. A nearly identical mess covers most of the floor. What is she making? And why is she doing it in my room?

Jeez, mom. I’ve only been gone a few weeks.

Ava turns around and leads the way back down to the main floor. “Okay, time for Operation Photobomb. Let’s go.”

Octavia and Zelik follow. I don’t follow, instead I wander over my bedroom window and stare out at the familiar. I can’t believe this. I feel like my parents just took the last eighteen years of my life and threw them away. This isn’t my space anymore. I don’t have a home here. I’m homeless.

Logically, I know that’s still my bed under that mess, and my books on the shelves, but emotions don’t obey logic, so I’m a homeless outcast with nowhere to call my own. There is

the strangest, most uncomfortable, twisty feeling behind my ribs.

I'm staring at nothing when a white sedan pulls to a stop across the street. I don't pay much attention until no one gets out of the car.

Weird.

I push the sheer curtain aside to get a better look. A man sits in the car. He has dirty blond hair and a familiar face. I've seen him before. But where?

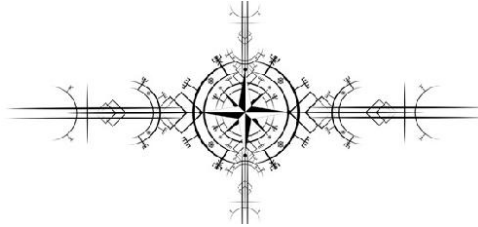
"Hey." Ryker's hand slides down my back in a soothing caress and suddenly I don't give a shit who might be visiting the neighbors. "You okay?"

"Told you I wasn't adopted." I drop the curtain back into place and turn around so I can wrap my arms around him. I hold him close, my cheek pressed to his chest. "I'm okay."

"Operation Photobomb? Did she give our upcoming meet-up a name?"

I grin. That's so something Ava would do.

THIRTY-THREE



I give my parents and Hermes a quick hug goodbye. Mom grabs Ryker and hugs him like he's hers. I guess he's not used to being touched by other people because he is awkward and stiff for a moment before melting into her arms and hugging her back.

We finally extricate ourselves and drive down the street to the parking lot of an old, boarded up restaurant that Ava and I chose in advance. Ryker parks next to Ava's car. I place a hand on Ryker's thigh. "Wait here. I want to talk to her first."

When Ryker nods, I go to the passenger side of Ava's car, ask Zelik and Octavia to join Ryker in his, and plop into the front seat like I've done hundreds of times before.

This time, it feels different.

The moment the door closes, Ava hits the locks, rolls up the windows and turns the radio on loud enough that there is zero chance of the others overhearing. "Okay, Dani. Talk."

I do. I tell her everything I can remember, every detail, right up to the moment we met at my parents' house for dinner.

Ava is quiet, her hands on the steering wheel as she stares ahead. "Does his royal highness know you're telling me all this?"

"Yes."

"You in love with him?" This time, her question is accompanied by a teasing smile.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“And you’re sure you’re one of them, one of these legacies?”

“There’s no other explanation. I healed Ryker twice. Then there’s the visions I’ve had my whole life. Dreaming about the draug since I was small? Ryker said I must be a mix of some kind, because the powers I have are weird. We’re still trying to figure out which bloodline I came from.”

“A mutt. Figures.” There is nothing but love in her voice. “Okay, but I’ve known your parents my whole life. They are not magical wizards. And I can’t see them lying to you, your entire life, about being adopted. And you have your dad’s eyes and your mom’s nose. So something doesn’t add up.”

“They keep records of all the family bloodlines. Ryker said he’d help me look for clues. Maybe it skips generations or something? Like eye color or musical ability?”

“A recessive gene?”

“I guess. I know I’m not adopted. I didn’t believe it for a second, and Ryker confirmed it tonight.”

“How? By asking a few questions and looking at baby pictures?”

“No, by using his power to determine that my mom was telling the truth when she talked about being pregnant and giving birth to me.”

“He can do that?” She drops her head back against the headrest and closes her eyes as if she’s exhausted. I wouldn’t blame her. It’s a lot to take in. “Never mind. Of course he can. Well, everything makes a lot more sense now.”

“What are you talking about?” I turn to face her. “I read everything you sent me. I don’t understand what’s going on.”

She looks over her shoulder at the other car. “You trust them?”

“Yes.”

She turns back around to face me, and her dark brown eyes are devoid of humor. “You’re sure? One hundred percent sure? This is life or death.”

“That serious?” When she just stares, I check my logic. I love Ryker. Ryker trusts Octavia and Zelik. They haven’t given me a reason to doubt them. At least not yet. Octavia’s father is an issue, but I either trust Ryker’s judgment about her, or I don’t. “Yeah.”

“Okay. Let’s get this party started.” Ava gets out of the car. I follow suit, wandering to the trunk, where I watch as she lifts a heavy binder that was hidden under a blanket. She closes the trunk and pulls the contents of the binder free as the sound of three car doors slam.

“What’s all this?” I squint down at the manila folders. Ava opens one and places a photograph that has been stapled to a group of papers, face up, flat on the trunk of her sedan.

Damn. It’s too dark to read anything.

Ava continues to empty the contents of the envelopes as Ryker, Zelik, and Octavia gather around. “We need to do this quick, now that we know you are a real-life Cinderella, with your midnight monster curfew—”

I lean my head on Ava’s shoulder, amazed, as always, at the way she absorbs information without freaking out.

Octavia glares at me, lifting her cell phone flashlight so that the light blinds me. “Monster curfew?” She puts one hand on her hip and looks more formidable than someone our age has any right to be. “I can’t believe Ryker let you tell her.”

“Drop it, O. We already had this conversation.” Ryker grabs the light from her hands and shines it on Ava’s offerings.

Ava doesn’t stop until the entire trunk is covered. The way she has things clipped and sorted into manila envelopes, it looks like she’s a super-spy giving her assassins their target packages. I feel like I’m watching a bad movie.

Ryker reaches out and studies the photograph of a woman who looks like she’s in her mid-thirties. Nothing special about her. Brown hair. Nice smile. I watch from the side as he flips

the picture up to look at the first piece of paper Ava stapled to the image.

Ava stands on tiptoes to see what Ryker is looking at. “That is one of the people who disappeared last year. She graduated from Forsetta fifteen years ago. Three kids. Husband was out of town when she went missing, so the police don’t consider him a suspect. There’s been no trace of her. She left work, got in her car to drive home, and vanished.”

“What about the car?” I ask.

Ava reaches across me to flip the top page over, revealing the second, which is an article about the missing woman’s car. I speed read for the important information, like the fact that the car turned up on the side of a country road, burned to a crisp, and more than two hundred miles away from where she was last seen.

I glance at the array of photographs, all with attached documents. There are a lot of pictures. All women. “How many are there?”

Ava crosses her arms over her chest and gives me her *I told you so* look. “Twenty-three women, either dead or missing, and they all disappeared in the last eight months. I haven’t had time to go back farther than that. I’m guessing I’ll find even more.”

“The Servants?” Zelik’s suggestion causes Ryker and Octavia to exchange a look. Zel has been looking at each missing person’s documents, in turn, sorting them into two stacks.

Ava watches him until one grows noticeably larger than the other. “What is that? What are the two stacks?”

Zelik shrugs like whatever he’s done is of no importance, but I don’t believe him. I know Ava doesn’t either. “We have two dorms at school. I was just sorting them by which building they lived in.”

“Okay. Good idea. Maybe there’s a link.” Ava moves over to inspect the two stacks. I look at Ryker. His expression is grave, and I think I know why. One of Zelik’s stacks has just

four photos. The other is piled so high he has to hold them in place to prevent them from tipping over. Ava, however, is thrilled. “Wow. There has to be something going on. Only four are from this dorm? Which one is that?”

“Legacy Hall.”

I reach for Ryker’s hand and squeeze. Only four legacies in that entire collection. That means nineteen ravenborn have been killed or gone missing. The question is, who killed them? The Servants of Seidr? The legacy families who decided their ravenborn weren’t powerful enough? Were they killed in draug attacks, like Octavia’s mother? Like I could have been at prom?

“Ava, can we take these?” I ask.

“Why do you think I brought them?”

The next couple weeks of school fly by in a haze of failed healing classes, secret combat training, and intruding on other groups’ activities in an attempt to figure out which legacy lineage I belong to. Ryker made copies of everything Ava gave us and took it to Attie. I thought it was a bad idea, but he seems to believe she is on his side and not happy about the families who kill the weaker ravenborn.

I don’t know what to do about any of it, so I wait. I have problems of my own to deal with.

I still haven’t healed a single cell in class with Mr. Gauvreau. And, to be honest, if I haven’t found my healing essence in three weeks of training, I don’t think I ever will. Either I am amazing at blocking my own abilities, or I don’t belong to Eir.

Which is weird, because I’ve saved Ryker’s life not once, but twice. I’ve seen him recover from wounds that should have

killed him in minutes; watched as his muscles and skin knit themselves back together like they had a mind of their own. It's not a coincidence, but I have no idea how I did it.

Is there some other god that could heal? Or maybe, if the Norse gods are real, maybe the other gods were, too? What about the Greek gods? Or Hindu? The world is full of different, godly pantheons that have been worshipped throughout all of history. Maybe this Norse thing is the wrong thing for me.

Do draug attack descendants of other pantheons? Maybe the reason Mr. G can't find my power, and the reason the draug have ignored me my entire life, is because I don't smell right to them. My energy might not be on their menu. Or have I worked so hard to suppress everything strange going on in my body for the last eighteen years that it now takes a full-blown emergency to break through?

Octavia and Ryker are going everywhere together and appear to have come to an understanding. I don't know what he said to her, but she stopped scowling at me every time I see her. With the bonding ceremony coming up so soon, I'm glad they worked it out. I'm still not a huge Octavia fan, but when I consider who she has for a father, I decide to cut her some slack. I don't want Ryker to be unhappy, so I'm determined to find a way to get along with her.

Zelik convinced the descendants of Fulla—the goddess of secrets—to let me sit in on one of their meetings.

That was last night and I'm still reeling. One thing I'm not wrong about? There is no way in hell I have any Fulla genes in my body. They are the creepiest group I've met since I came here.

The Fulla meet in the middle of the night. They don't wear black, like Beth and Nini's friends seem to prefer, but ghostly white robes that are so thin and transparent they look more like shadows than actual clothing. They wear masks to conceal their faces, despite the fact that they all know each other, which is just weird.

I was told they meet twice a week to discuss the knowledge acquired by their various members. Based on what I understood, their secret knowledge sounded like typical high school gossip to me. I don't care who's dating whom, which teachers are getting along, or not getting along with their spouses, or each other. Draug are trying to kill you, people! Stop drifting around like ghosts in the dark and learn how to defend yourselves!

Once their official meeting began, they never addressed me once, ignored my presence, and spoke in code half the time. I couldn't understand most of it. The words were all mixed like a strange English soup. They could have been talking about what they had for breakfast that day, or how weird my clothes were, and I would have never known. The entire meeting took less than thirty minutes, and then they all dispersed like smoke in the wind.

I told Ryker, Zelik, and Beth about the unique experience and we crossed "Fulla" off the list of potentials. According to Ryker, no matter how strange they seemed, I would have known if I belonged.

We also tried out the descendants of Loki, the god of mischief, but that meeting was even shorter than the first. I left as soon as they started talking about putting bleach in someone's shampoo bottle.

Note to self: avoid all interaction with them and, if possible, never, ever make one of them mad.

Those failures aside, I spent the time improving substantially with both a sword and a staff. I can even hold my own against Zelik for a few minutes. To be honest, next to watching TV with Beth and my mini dates with Ryker, training has been the only thing keeping me sane. There's something gratifying about pushing my body to its limits and succeeding. I totally understand why my dad won't give up running, no matter how much his knees bother him.

Graduation is in less than a week and I've been hunched over my desk all day, working on my essay about the queen's battle strategy during the Vanir war.

I let out a sigh and rub my temples, stretching my aching back and rubbing the tiredness from my eyes. The sun set hours ago. I didn't notice the room had gotten so dark—I was too busy concentrating on my assignment to pay attention. I stand up and lift my arms to the ceiling, feel the satisfying pop of my joints.

I wander through our suite and glance at Beth's empty bed. It's nearly midnight, and she's not back yet. I frown. I wonder where she is? I don't think the seances go this late, and I know she's not huddled in the library doing finals. She's not that studious. Maybe she has a new boyfriend?

Well, she'll be back at some point. She's a big kid. She can handle herself.

I get ready for bed, putting on the comfiest pair of pajama bottoms I have, and throw an oversized t-shirt over the top. I crawl into bed and let out a contented sigh as I snuggle into the blankets.

God, I love sleeping.

Until the vision hits me again and I find myself standing in a crowd inside the Hall of the Ancients.

Damn it. I *really* wanted to sleep peacefully tonight.

Unfortunately, I notice nothing new. It's pretty standard at this point. The crowds, the silence, the ritual, the elders—all exactly like the last time. I wait patiently, mentally bracing for the searing pain that fractures the vision in two.

But the pain never hits.

The elder uses the ancient golden sword to cut into Ryker's and Octavia's palms. The slice is shallow—just enough to make them bleed. They clasp each other's forearms, blood dripping from their embrace, as they swear an ancient oath to one another, their voices rising and falling in unison.

When the last word of the oath is spoken, the crowd erupts into applause. Some people are wiping tears from their eyes, and others are staring in unabashed awe. Ryker and Octavia

smile grimly at one another, hands still clasped together. Then something catches Octavia's eye. It looks like she's trying to talk to someone?

I follow her gaze to a man in a long, golden robe, who is walking toward them. Ryker turns around to look at whoever's approaching. That's the man—I know it is—the one who shoves the sword through Ryker's chest. And yet, neither Ryker nor Octavia seem alarmed in any capacity. They just seem confused.

Do they know him?

My heart races as I wait for the death blow I know is coming. But nothing happens. The robed figure calls out some weird blessing in a language I don't know, and the crowd cheers as Ryker and Octavia get to their feet to stand before everyone as a united pair.

They both look relieved, if I had to put a label to it. Glad the ceremony is over.

Another person whom I think must be Attie, although I can't quite focus on her face, walks forward and hands my friends a rolled document that looks like an ancient scroll. All the students received one. I assume it's their version of a diploma. Octavia and Ryker both accept their scrolls and bow slightly, shaking the woman's hand as the cheers around me rise in volume.

Suddenly, the entire scene shifts, moving and blurring like sand falling through my fingers.

Screams pierce my ears. Long, shrieking, terrified howls from multiple voices. I watch as Octavia is dragged off the platform, kicking and cursing through her tears, until she is swallowed up by the crowd.

Confused, I look behind me to see a stampede of people stepping over one another in their panic, trying to reach an exit. I turn in a slow circle and watch as one person after another crumble to their knees with daggers shoved through

their hearts and silent agony frozen on their faces. The attackers are wearing green and brown, their uniforms form fitting and reflective, as if their clothing would act as a prism in full sunlight. Their faces are covered, but one after another, they grab someone and drive daggers through their hearts.

The acrid scent of panic fills the air as the people pound against the doors, which are locked, or blockaded, from the other side.

Where is he? Where is Ryker?

I run toward the stage where I know he's supposed to be. I step around a large man whose body blocks my view and take two steps before I see a robed man grab the sword and drive it through Ryker's heart, all the way to its ruby-embedded hilt. The squelch of tearing flesh and angry bone reverberates around the hall. Chaos surrounds me. No one is watching as Ryker falls to his knees. Bright red blood pours from his mouth as he crumples to the side, his hands wrapped around the hilt of the sword protruding from his chest.

The killer stands, holding a pendant over Ryker's dying body, chanting in a foreign language as he watches Ryker die.

I need to get to Ryker. If I could just get a little closer, I could see the killer's face and—

The scene changes, the noise and smell of death fades completely.

Dream me blinks, confused. The faint shuffling of feet and people whispering in their seats fills my ears. Ryker is smiling as he stands between Attie and another woman who looks so much like him I know she must be his mother, the queen. She is beaming with pride and beckons to the side of the platform, waving at Octavia to join them. The smile on Octavia's face is so bright and genuine, I almost don't recognize her. She looks so happy.

What the fuck? I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling of my bedroom. I have no idea what the hell just happened. Why am I having so much trouble holding on to a vision? Normally, I would pay good money to make them stop. But now, they don't make sense. In the past, both sleeping and awake, the things I saw were terrifying, but they always made sense. Watching someone die isn't complicated, unless, like tonight, they die, then they don't.

I had hoped tapering off my medication would help me sort things out, not make my already jumbled head more of a mess. I don't know what to do.

“Rule number one!” Beth explains proper seance etiquette to Ryker, Zelik, Octavia, and me as she leads us down a dim hallway in the history building. “No electronic devices allowed. The blue light really confuses the spirits.”

Her heeled combat boots thump against the linoleum tiles, her quick pace difficult to keep up with. She doesn't bother looking at us as she speaks. We have somewhere to be, namely sitting in on their event—which Beth informed me is basically a seance—and figure out if I belong in this group with the other descendants of Hel.

“Rule number two!” She holds up two fingers as she makes a left turn, and we scramble along behind her, the soles of my shoes squeaking on the floor due to the sudden movement. “No bright clothing allowed. That means the two of you,” she points to me and Zelik over her shoulder, “will have to cover up. There are black robes you can borrow when we get there.”

Zelik chuckles. “What? Do bright colors ‘*make the spirits angry*’ or something?”

Beth stops in her tracks, and I barely stop my nose from jamming into her back. She pivots on her heeled boot and shoots Zelik one of the smoothest winks I've ever seen, along with a dramatic hair flip. "Exactly. Looks like you're starting to get it, pretty boy."

Beth takes off again, leaving Zelik a stumbling, flustered mess, and shoots down the hall like a woman on a mission. I glance over at Zelik, smirking, but he glares in response. He's doing his best to not look affected by Beth's teasing, but his face gives him away—red as a tomato.

Pretty boy. He totally is. Not as beautiful as Ryker, but definitely not an ugly duckling, either.

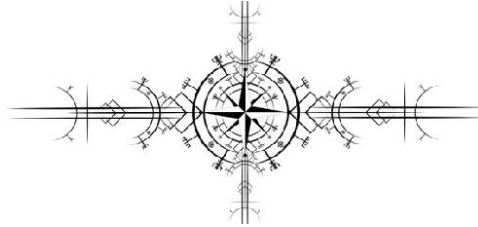
"Last but not least: rule number three!" Beth turns again and stops in front of an unassuming classroom door. "*Never* break the circle while a guest is visiting, and never touch the sacred offering."

Chills run down my spine. I've seen that exact situation in countless horror movies. "Um. Beth? If we break the circle by accident...what happens then?"

She takes one look at my blanched face and drags her long acrylic fingernails across my shoulder, sending goosebumps down my arm. "You worried we'll all get attacked and die? Or be haunted for life?"

"What? No." Yes. Absolutely, yes.

THIRTY-FOUR



Beth snickers. “Oh, please. This isn’t the dark ages! We solved that problem centuries ago. Have a little faith.” She pinches thumb and forefinger together to emphasize her point. “Don’t talk to anyone. Don’t touch anything. Don’t break the circle and do not, ever, touch the silver chalice. It holds our offering to Hel.”

“What do you offer?” Ryker asks.

“The goddess prefers Akvavit. Spill her drink, and she cuts off the whole show.”

Octavia speaks for the first time since Beth started leading us to the gathering. “So why can’t we break the circle, then?”

“It’s disrespectful to our guests. Quite offensive, actually. It would be like asking a friend to sit at the table and then pulling the chair out from under them.” She shrugs and nods as though that makes perfect sense. “Someone broke circle once, and no one answered our call for almost a year.”

Ryker leans down to whisper in my ear, his warm breath tickling my ear. “Who are they calling?”

“No idea.” I shrug. “Just roll with it.”

Without another word, Beth opens the classroom door and steps inside. I follow her in with the others hot on my heels. I’m surprised by what I see. For some reason, I expected the door to transport us to a different realm. I wanted to see a room painted black, lined with lit candles, cracked bones, and flimsy old books strewn across the space. I imagined the students would stand in a circle in long, black robes pulled

over their faces, not speaking a word. I wanted goosebumps to break out all over my skin from the spooky ambience as we entered the space. It's a seance, after all.

I guess that's witch shit. Or only in the movies. Who knows?

I smile at Beth and try to hide my disappointment as the standard-looking classroom door opens to reveal what looks like a cozy lounge. There is a large Vegvisir inlaid in the tile floor, black on white. Each of the eight spokes of the compass terminate in front of an oversized, stuffed black chair, clearly made to seat two students comfortably. All eight double chairs face the center, where a chest-high, elegant wooden table is draped with a black cloth. In the center is an unopened bottle of liquor next to a sparkling silver chalice.

That must be the Ahh-quaw-veet? Never heard of it, but hey, Hel should get what Hel wants.

There are eight other students, all dressed head-to-toe in black with heavy eye makeup, lounging around the room, sitting on the handful of similar double chairs placed at intervals along the walls, or on the floor, chatting in murmured whispers. All ages are present, from middle schoolers to graduating seniors. And everyone is descended from Hel herself except Ryker, Zelik, Octavia, and, well, maybe me.

We walk in and all chatter stops. Beth holds up both hands and all eyes turn to her at once. "Greetings, my friends. I want to thank you for agreeing to allow the prince, Magni's legacy, the most powerful ravenborn on campus, and the newest, most powerful among the legacies, to our humble evening. I know I am not alone when I admit that I really hope she is one of us."

There is a prolonged silence before Nini pops up from somewhere and calls out. "Hey, Dani!"

Her cheerful greeting breaks the spell, and they all return to whatever they were doing before we entered the room. Which looks like chatting and not much else.

Beth points to one of the double chairs around the edge of the classroom, and Ryker takes my hand, leading me to it. Our

thighs touch when we sit. Neither one of us pulls away.

An older girl—I keep forgetting Beth isn't graduating until next year—walks to the center and stands quietly next to the raised table.

One by one, they realize it's time to do whatever they're going to do, and begin to wander over and sit in one of the black seats facing the center, hands quietly folded in their laps.

Beth points to another white chair, indicating Octavia and Zelik should take a seat as well.

Octavia wanders around the edge of the circle. Zelik cuts straight through the middle.

“Zelik Magnisen, get out of my circle!” The girl in the center yells at him and he scurries the rest of the way, beating Octavia to their shared seat. The officiant, if that's what they call her, scowls at each of us in turn before walking toward me and Ryker.

She passes the black chairs, takes two more steps and stops, pointing at the floor.

I look down to discover another circle, this one encompassing the entire center area and all the seats. “Do not cross this line for any reason. Do you understand?”

Ryker lowers his chin in a show of respect and addresses her. “My deepest apologies, Thea. I promise we won't cause any trouble.”

Of course Ryker knows her. They're both seniors. I assure her I will remain exactly where I am and she repeats the process with Octavia and Zelik, with an additional scolding for the prior offender.

I search for Beth and see her watching Zelik like a hawk. He assures Thea he won't repeat his mistake and looks away. He catches Beth looking and grins at her as she turns away.

Interesting.

Beth's peers mutter and cast sideways glances at us as they walk to their places, more than a few glares letting me know we are absolutely invading their space.

Thea walks to Beth and whispers something in her ear. Beth leaps to her feet, opens a closet door and then tosses Zelik and I heavy black robes. “Sorry. I forgot to give these to you when we walked in.”

I give her a reassuring smile. “No problem.” I immediately regret sniffing it as I throw it on over my clothes. It smells moldy and decrepit. I would bet good money that these things haven’t been taken out of that closet in *years*. Octavia is wearing dark, forest green, so I guess she gets a pass. Ryker got lucky—he’s already wearing a black t-shirt and gray-toned jeans. Or maybe he knew. Would have been nice if he shared.

Ryker glances in Zelik’s direction and chuckles. I admit, Zel does look funny in the giant robe.

“Do I look that ridiculous?”

Ryker turns and gives me a once over. “Never. You look like an adorable undertaker.”

The only word I choose to hear is ‘adorable.’

Nini, wearing a black and gray plaid skirt and braids, jaunts over to Beth and taps her on the shoulder. “Hey, Beth...” She sheepishly rocks back and forth from heel to toe when Beth turns around. “Who are we gonna talk to today? Can it be Franky? Oh! Or Gunnhilde? I like Gunnhilde. Last time, she let me braid her hair!”

Beth sighs. “We can’t summon spirits who don’t want to talk to us. You know this. And Gunnhilde only comes around once or twice a year.”

Nini pouts, arms crossed, and huffs. “I think we should be able to make them answer us.” After a few seconds of moping, she turns toward me. “How are you, Dani? Are you super excited? I am. I can’t wait ‘til you see what Beth is going to do.”

“I’m nervous. And what is Beth doing? She didn’t say anything to me.”

“Duh, it’s a surprise.” She walks up to Ryker and meets his gaze head on. “I know who you are, but I don’t *know* you.” She holds out her hand. “I’m Nini.”

“I’m Ryker. Nice to meet you.” He tries to give her a friendly smile, but it’s met with a suspicious side-eye.

“I really like Dani.”

“So do I.”

She huffs as I die of embarrassment. I’m mortified in advance of whatever she’s about to say. “Don’t break her heart, or I’ll make sure someone really nasty haunts you for all eternity.”

“Nini!” I gasp as her threat sinks in.

Ryker throws his head back and laughs. “Well played, daughter of Hel. I think we are going to get along just fine.”

“We’ll see.” Nini continues to stare at him like she’s trying to read his mind or something. The girl is cute as a button, and totally unhinged. I never know what is going to come out of her mouth.

“Okay Nini, that’s enough.” Beth steps in, saving me from further embarrassment. “Go hit the lights.”

I glance up at Ryker, cheeks aflame, but he just smirks.

Nini scurries to a switch near the door and dims the lights until I can just slightly make out what’s happening in the room. Beth signals for her friends to take their seats and nods at Thea that the group is ready to begin.

Ryker lifts his arm and wraps it around my shoulders, pulling me close to him. I can feel his body heat radiating through his shirt as my shoulder rests against him. To our left and a little in front of us, Zelik is leaning forward, forearms on his knees, watching every move the people in the room make. Octavia’s back is straight. She’s not leaning into the cushion, and her legs are crossed at the ankles. She sits like royalty, like a real princess, which I guess to the ravenborn, she is.

I think about making myself a bit more dignified, but with this over-sized robe swallowing me up, and Ryker so close, I decide I don’t care if I look like a slouching undertaker as long as he doesn’t seem to mind the smell of closet dust and moth balls.

The atmosphere in the room suddenly changes from casual and easygoing to intense and sharp. The previously chatty students are now silent. The air seems to thicken with something I don't know. Power?

My heart races like a wild horse in my chest.

Breaking the silence, Beth speaks in a low, melodic voice. "We gather here today to call upon the spirits of our ancestors. To seek their guidance and wisdom as we navigate through the challenges of life." Slowly, she raises her arms and tilts her head back. "As always, we start with a prayer and offering to Hel, our mother, and goddess of the underworld."

As Thea opens the bottle of liquor and fills the silver chalice, Beth leads the group in a chant to Hel, her voice rising and falling in a rhythmic pattern. The words flow off their tongues as though they have spoken them thousands of times. The language is strange—not only do I not understand it, I don't think it comes from the Earthly plane. The vowels are angular, the consonants heavily emphasized. It's eerie and mesmerizing all at once, and I find myself getting swept away in the sound.

The chanting ends, and Thea speaks. Her quiet voice somehow fills the entire space like she's using a microphone and amps. "We welcome the spirits into our embrace."

I stare, fascinated, as a haunting melody rises from the participants. Thea raises her arms toward the ceiling. "Spirits of years past, wise ancestors, we ask that you come forth and speak with us. We invite you to join us in our sacred space and thank you for your wisdom and guidance."

The white tiles inside the circle begin to flicker on and off, emitting a soft, glowing luminescence. The effect is eerie, not quite like a strobe light, but somehow worse for being less. Shadows dance on the walls, alive and yet not alive. Even Nini, a young lady brave enough to threaten her prince, looks like she's in a trance.

"She's here." Nini's announcement makes Beth nod. "Please, spirit. We feel your presence. Make yourself known to us."

I forget to breathe, frightened and exhilarated at the same time. What does a spirit look like? How will it sound? What era will they be from? What happens after you die? I have so many questions, and I'm about to have answers many would kill for.

I stare, eyes peeled and ears open, waiting for the spirit to show itself. I'm so attuned to the room, I jump when Nini lets out a screech. "Gunnhilde!! I'm so happy you're here!" She jumps up, clapping her hands in pure excitement.

Gunnhilde? Here? Where?

I try to follow Nini's line of sight, but all I see is a whole lot of nothing. Where Gunnhilde should be standing, all I see is Thea standing close to Beth and empty space. The other students break out into excited chatter and wide smiles. They ask questions to the air as though they're greeting an old friend. How have you been? How's your husband? What's the most recent Underworld gossip? Fregn said *what*?

I turn first to Zelik, then to Ryker, a silent question on my face. Do they see a spirit wandering around the classroom? Am I missing something obvious? But the look on their faces matches mine: confused and a little disturbed.

It's amazing, really. While Hel's descendants are chatting away, smiles on their faces, I don't notice anything out of the ordinary. I don't even feel a chill running down my spine, or a change in the temperature. Even little Nini is sitting down again, braiding invisible locks of hair as she chats away.

Okay. I'm starting to think I am *not* one of Hel's progeny.

I make eye contact with Zelik and Ryker and shake my head. They know immediately what it means: this experiment was a complete failure. And now we have to sit through a social hour we can't even participate in.

Beth smiles and gazes around the room, pausing briefly on each of us before fixing her eyes on me. "Dani, are you okay?" she asks, concern etched on her forehead. "You look a little pale."

“I’m fine,” I say, forcing a smile onto my face. “Just a little disappointed, I guess.”

Beth nods, her expression softening as understanding crosses her face. She doesn’t say anything; she doesn’t need to. She knows what it means.

I watch her approach. She stops when the tips of her feet are just on the other side of their sacred circle. “I thought this might happen. I’m sorry, Dani.”

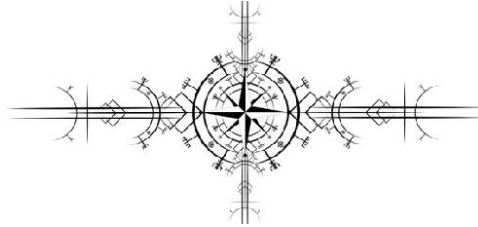
“It’s okay.”

Zelik jumps into the conversation. “It’s not the end of the world. There are still lots of other options to try.” He has been the star member of the “figure out Dani’s DNA” team ever since we brought him on board. As Ryker’s right-hand man since birth, he has a near encyclopedic knowledge of the godly families and their traits. Turns out, Magni’s bloodline is considered almost as royal as Ryker’s. Almost.

Beth clears her throat, and we all return our attention to her. “I have a surprise for you.”

Oh, no. Why do I get the feeling surprises and dead people should never mix?

THIRTY-FIVE



“What surprise?” I don’t like the sound of this. I’m not one of them. As far as I’m concerned, we should cross Hel off the list and get out of here.

Beth rubs her palms together, clearly excited. “Normally, we aren’t allowed to request any specific spirit or group come through, at least not at school.” She glances over her shoulder to make sure Nini is still occupied with her long-haired, invisible friend before turning back to us. “It’s a stupid rule. The elders think we’ll all waste away talking to dead relatives, rather than live our own lives. It’s dumb. I do it at home all the time.”

“Who do you talk to?” I ask.

“My grandmother. She’s awesome. But I’m careful. I don’t talk to her more than once or twice a month.” Beth glances back over her shoulder once more, her gaze landing on Nini first and Thea second. Thea seems to be equally fascinated with Nini’s Gunnhilde. The entire group is huddled around Nini’s chair, having quite a chat. All I see is a bunch of people who look like they’re talking to thin air.

“Do they come? When you ask for someone? Does that person show up?” Octavia asks, her voice tight. She must be thinking about her mom.

Beth grins and shrugs her shoulders. “Depends. We can’t force them to show up, so first we ask, and then they have to want to be here.”

“I don’t know any dead people that I would want to talk to.” I’m very used to seeing death in my visions. But this is so different. I could understand if Octavia wanted to talk to her mom, but me? No. My grandparents all died years ago. Making them come here, now, if that’s even possible, feels disrespectful. What would I even say?

“No, no, no. Don’t worry. It’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?”

“I know you’ve been working really hard on that stupid essay, so I looked through a couple of those dusty old books, the ones you brought back from the library?”

Oh, yes, the useless, thousand-page history books so old I was afraid to turn the pages.

“Anyway, I found the names of a couple warriors who fought in the war. I’m going to ask them to visit, so you can ask them about the battle yourself.” She’s practically vibrating with excitement. “Can you imagine Shaw’s face when you turn in *that* report?”

Ryker’s relaxed body became hard as iron as she spoke. “Those warriors died thousands and thousands of years ago.”

Beth waves her hand in a dismissive gesture. “I know. There’s like a million to one chance anyone will answer me. Still, it’ll be fun to try.” She actually giggles like a little girl, full of glee. Or maybe it’s nerves. Her eyes lock on to me. “I wanted to do something special.”

“Thanks, but you don’t have to.”

“Too late.” Beth’s singsong voice grows quiet, her whispered words, or prayer, or chant—I have no idea what she’s saying—makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Several minutes pass. Nothing happens. Thank goodness. I look over at Ryker. He catches the movement and turns to me. Our eyes lock. I see the same relief in his.

I watch Beth, wishing she would accept defeat and stop whatever it is she’s doing. Octavia and Zelik walk over and stand next to Ryker’s side of the seat. We’re all staring at my

roommate when her voice changes, suddenly echoing, like she's talking with a tin can pressed to her lips.

A shimmer, the slightest flicker, appears next to her.

"What was that?" I push off my seat to stand. I need a better look.

"I don't see anything." Ryker comes to his feet and moves up next to me.

"There!" Something shimmers, thin like dangling thread. The faint apparition appears, then vanishes. Again.

Maybe I *am* part Hel.

"Well, shit." Beth has turned, hands on her hips. She is obviously looking at something, or someone, on her side of the line. "Uh, huh. Yes. I understand everything you're saying. Nice beard. I bet you were a real Viking, weren't you? That's a pathetic sword."

She sighs and turns to look at me. "Sorry. I totally forgot that he speaks some weird version of the language that's like —" She glances at Ryker. "Thousands of years old. He's talking." She turns back to face her invisible friend. "In fact, he's shouting at me now. He keeps pointing at over at you." She looks at me. "Sorry, Dani. I can't understand a single word."

A low, rumbling gargle grates on my nerves. I flinch. What the fuck was that? I take a step toward Ryker. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Zelik asks.

Octavia looks confused.

Ryker's eyes are locked on me, focused and intense. "What did you hear?"

"I don't know. It was weird." The sound repeats, this time louder, so intense it's like fingernails clawing the inside of my skull.

Beth turns to the invisible warrior and yells something I can't hear as a frigid wind blasts through the room, tugging at

my robes.

“Get out!” Beth turns toward me and screams. “Go!” Her hair is like a thousand tiny whips flying around her head. I see the faintest trace of glowing white next to her. For a moment I can *almost* make out a figure, then it disappears.

I lift my hands to cover my ears, but there is no defense. The rumbling voice now sounds like a waterfall of gravel pouring into the room. Invisible, cold claws wrap around my heart. I can’t move. I take a step toward the door, and it feels like something inside me is being ripped apart. Crackling, agonizing electricity runs up and down my spine. I stumble back, barely registering that Ryker catches me.

The strange rumbling voices—I can distinguish a few different voices now—reach inside me and make my bones ache, cold all the way to the marrow.

“Beth?” I shout, hoping she will hear me over the noise.

Beth, who has her hands lifted like she’s trying to hold up the ceiling, glances back at us over her shoulder. “I can’t stop them!”

I look past Beth to find the other Hel legacies are all screaming now, Nini’s high-pitched cry somehow clear as ringing crystal. Thea climbs to her feet, rushing toward Beth.

“Beth! What did you do?” Thea stops walking and topples over before she can reach Beth’s side. Beth drops to her knees, hands over her ears, a loud wail coming from her as she crumples. “Run!”

I can’t move, frozen in horror, as the rest of Hel’s descendants collapse to the floor, their bodies flailing, writhing as if they are having seizures.

One faint, shimmering object is now two. Then five.

“Fuck this.” Zelik jumps to his feet. “Stay with Dani.” He gives Ryker the order and rushes toward where Beth lays in a crumpled heap inside their precious circle.

Something slams into him and his body flies backward through the air to crash against the wall.

I try to focus, but the entire room is shifting before my eyes, thousands of shimmering strands of light distorting everything. They are moving, all of them, like a river of flowing water.

Ryker pulls me by my robes until my back is against the wall, but nothing changes. The wind is so powerful, one of the chairs shifts positions, sliding across the floor.

Octavia stands with a dagger in her hand. The wind howls around her, but she is like marble, untouchable. Ryker and Zelik have both gone pale, the lines around their mouths a clear indication that they are in pain. Whatever power, magic, or divine fuckery this is, they're feeling it, too.

I clutch my chest and yell at Ryker over the wind. "Get out of here!" I'm in the worst shape of the three of us. "Go get help!"

Ryker shakes his head. "No! I'm not leaving you."

The long, rumbling sounds have multiplied, so many voices it's impossible to pull one from the many. I feel like my ears are bleeding, but my friends, though they are fighting the wind, don't seem to be affected by the explosion of sound. "Don't you hear that?"

Ryker shakes his head. I look at Zelik. Another no.

"Octavia?" Ryker yells her name, but she is gone.

We turn as one and I see her, nearly bent double, leaning into the unnatural wind with a blade in each hand. She slashes at nothing as she pushes her way, step by agonizingly slow step, through the circle toward the table in the center.

The silver chalice gleams. The black cloth draped over the table is still, unaffected by the unnatural storm around us.

The legacies inside the circle are no longer moving. Beth, Nini and the others are still, silent heaps. I wonder if they are all dead.

With a scream of pure rage, Octavia takes the last few steps and topples the table, the liquor bottle, and the offering to Hel.

The chalice clatters to the floor, the liquid splashing in every direction. The bottle shatters on the hard tile. The wind stops. The shimmering strands disappear. The unnatural cold inside my body eases.

It's quiet.

Ryker and I are both watching Octavia. She puts her hands on her hips, looks at the devastation, checks Thea, then Beth for a pulse, and gives us a quick nod.

They're still alive.

Octavia hasn't put her blades away, and her eyes are locked on me. "What the fuck was that?"

I don't have words. I have no idea. Along with Zelik and Octavia, I look at Ryker. This isn't my world, it's his.

"Zel, go get Klaus. Tell him to bring his two best healers and keep his mouth shut."

"On it." Zel disappears. I turn my head to the side and discreetly lift my hand to my ear, checking for blood. I sigh in relief when all I feel is normal, dry skin. So, it only *felt* like my eardrums exploded. Good to know.

"You didn't hear them roaring at us?"

"Who?" Octavia asks. She comes over and crouches down in front of Ryker. "You okay?"

He nods, and she turns to me.

"You?"

"Just a headache. Other than that, I'm fine." I hold her gaze for a moment. "Thanks for asking."

She snorts at my acknowledgement—she totally did not have to ask about me—and walks back over to Beth. Gently, she reaches down and rolls Beth onto her back. When I see Beth's chest moving up and down as she breathes, something inside me relaxes. Sure, Octavia said they were alive, but seeing it with my own eyes is better.

"Hear who, Dani?" Ryker is on his feet as well. He reaches a hand out to me and I accept his assistance as I get to my feet.

“I didn’t hear anything but the wind.” He glances over his shoulder at the collection of unconscious students still on the platform. “And them. Screaming.”

I walk to where Nini is in a crumpled heap and drop to my knees next to her. I arrange her so her head is in my lap as I think about my answer. “I don’t know. At first, I think it was whoever Beth summoned, just one deep voice. Then it just kept getting worse and worse. It sounded like there were hundreds of them.”

“Hundreds of dead warriors, here, in this room?” Octavia wanders over to the broken glass and is using the toe of her boot to push the pieces into a pile.

“Yes.” Nini’s quiet voice sends a jolt through me. “They were so loud.”

“You’re awake.” I move a piece of hair off her forehead. Why am I not surprised that she is the first one to wake from whatever this is? She’s a tough little cookie. “How do you feel? Are you okay?”

“No. I’m not. That should never have happened.”

Ryker and Octavia walk over and crouch down in front of her. Ryker takes her small hand in his. “What did happen?”

Nini grunts as she sits up, looking around at the other members of her family. “Are they okay?”

Octavia nods. “Yes. Just unconscious, like you were. But they’re alive. We sent for Klaus.”

Nini nods and takes a deep breath. “I don’t know what happened. Beth told me she was going to summon a warrior from the battle to surprise you.” She glances at me. “I thought it would be fun. These stupid practice sessions are usually so boring.”

“But what happened?” I ask.

“Didn’t you see them?”

I shake my head. “I saw shimmers, waves in the air like a mirage, but that’s it.”

“But you heard them?” Ryker asks.

“Yeah.”

Nini is watching me with narrowed eyes, clearly suspicious. “You have to be one of us, Dani. No one else can see or hear them.”

Ryker’s head is tilted, considering. “Maybe. I will have to do some research. There might be other bloodlines that can access Valhalla.”

“Valhalla?” This new life just keeps getting weirder and weirder. “Like Viking heaven? The spirit world?” I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am. If their gods are real, and Valkyries are real, then everything that goes along with them must be real as well. I just didn’t ever think it through.

“Yes. That Valhalla.”

The doors swing open and Zelik rushes in with Klaus and two other students I recognize from healing class, but never spoke to. Klaus looks at me, then Nini. “Are you okay?”

We both nod, but Klaus makes his way toward us, anyway. He bends down on one knee and presses a hand to my head. Warmth spreads and my headache finally goes away. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” He reaches for Nini. She stares at him as he raises a hand to her shoulder and closes his eyes. When he opens his eyes, Nini sighs in relief.

“Thank you.”

Klaus looks over his shoulder at the two older students hovering behind him as if they are waiting for orders from a twelve-year-old. Strange, but Ryker did say he was the strongest healer at school. Maybe age doesn’t matter so much as power.

“Don’t just stand there. Go for brain bleeds first, then check the rest of the body.”

Brain bleeds? That’s not good. The healers nod and move away, each going to a different unconscious student.

Zelik moves over and kneels next to Beth. “Over here, Klaus.”

Klaus gets to his feet and looks at Ryker as he walks toward Zelik. “What happened?”

“Off the record, Beth summoned a warrior who died on the battlefield during the Vanir war.”

“No fucking way. Is that a joke?” Klaus looks up from where he is now leaning over Beth’s unconscious form.

“No.”

“Okay. Wow. And on the record?”

Ryker rises to his feet and straightens his spine until he looks like what he is, the future king. “Nothing happened here. I don’t want Beth, Nini, or the others to get into trouble for trying to help us.”

Klaus lifts a brow. “So, we were never here?”

“Exactly.”

It takes a couple hours for Zelik, Octavia and the healers to escort all the members of Hel back to the safety of their dorm rooms.

Thea assured me none of them would say a word. Since me, Ryker, Zelik and Octavia were not supposed to be there—broken rule number one—and Beth was absolutely not supposed to request a specific spirit, let alone one old as dirt—broken rule number two, I believed her. Broken rule number two is, I believe, the real reason they all agreed to keep the whole disaster a secret.

Ryker and I are walking Beth back to our suite. She has one arm over my shoulders and the other draped over Ryker’s. Klaus says he did what he could to heal her. I would never tell

her this, but she still looks like death, and it's not just the make-up.

She's quiet until we get home and close the door behind us. I move toward her bedroom, but she shakes her head. "No. Not yet."

Ryker helps her over to the sofa and we both sit down on the coffee table, look at her, and wait.

I lean over and squeeze her knee. "Do you want anything? Water? Tea?"

She shakes her head. "No thanks. I'm still dizzy. I'd just puke it up."

Ryker leans forward, forearms resting on his thighs. "So what did happen?"

Beth reaches for a blanket. I can't watch her try to stretch for it, so I get up, grab the fuzzy thing, and drape it over her.

"I don't really know what happened."

"What? Beth, you're the one who called that warrior. You were talking to him. You said he was yelling at you." I'm rattling off facts like a computer.

"I know. But he was talking in a version of Norse that is so old, I didn't understand anything he said. And his spirit was different from anyone I've ever contacted before."

"Different how?" Ryker asks.

"I don't know how to describe it. More intense. Powerful. Most dead don't have something driving them, which makes sense, because they're dead." She tugs the blanket up around her chin and looks like a lost little girl. "But he wasn't like that. He wanted to do something. Go somewhere. It's like he was obsessed. He wanted out of that circle, and he wanted to go over to where all of you were sitting. I got that much. He rammed the edge and tried to break the energy barrier. He didn't get out, but that's when the others started coming in."

"What others? More warriors?"

“Yeah. Hundreds of them. They just started coming. I told them to go back, to go home, but they wouldn’t listen.” Her head drops to rest against the back of the sofa, and she blinks up at the ceiling. “That has never happened. Ever. They always listen. They have to. It’s part of Hel’s power. She rules the dead. I ordered him to go back, but that just made him mad.”

Ryker takes a deep breath, and I can practically feel him thinking. “What if Hel’s bloodline is so diluted you can no longer control the spirits when they come through?”

Beth shakes her head. “No. Nothing like this has ever happened before. If I had just a little more time, I would have been able to force him to go back. I could feel it. But then the others came through. It’s like they charged at us, like we were the enemy. I don’t know how, but that warrior must have opened the door for the rest of them. We all tried to stop them, but there were just too many. We all tried. I promise, we tried.”

“We know you did.” Ryker’s words seem to give Beth a sense of relief.

“How did you know to spill the offering?” Beth looks from me to Ryker, expecting an answer. I give her one.

“It wasn’t us. It was Octavia.” Here I go, giving the girl praise. Who knew this day would come? “She saved all of us.”

“Okay, well, I’m never doing that again. So, what now?” Beth asks, looking at me. “You heard them? You have to have a little bit of Hel in you somewhere.” She grins. “I knew we were sisters.”

“I don’t know.” I glance at Ryker. “We need to do some research. If I was from Hel, I should have been able to see them, and I couldn’t. All I saw was little shimmers, like threads in the air.”

“He was big and scary. Trust me, you didn’t miss much.”

Beth always makes me laugh. “Good to know.” I look over at Ryker. “Well, what now? There’s not a lot of time left before graduation. We’re going to have to wait to figure out what’s going on with me until after the ceremony.”

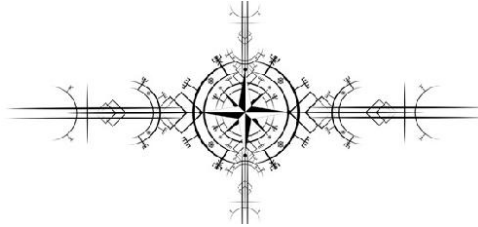
“You’re probably right. They’re making me go to rehearsals. Can you believe that bullshit?”

Makes sense to me. “Attie call in extra security?”

Ryker takes my hand. “My mother is bringing a bunch of ravenborn, their top fighters. We will have more security than Fort Knox.”

“Okay.” I warned them. It’s all I can do. Whatever Attie, Astavar and the queen have planned, I just hope it’s enough.

THIRTY-SIX



Beth jumps around her room, rocking out to whatever band she's listening to these days. She connected a small speaker to her phone and is blasting the music. I hear a lot of chatter from her as she goes through her closet, looking for something to wear.

“Beth!” I shout over the distorted guitars and grunge vocals. “Could you turn it down a bit, please?”

She dances over to the speaker and taps the volume button a few times. “Come on! We finished high school! You need to let loose. Have fun!”

I sit on my bed, scrolling through my socials, and stare blankly at her in response to her request. “Getting drunk and stumbling home at an ungodly hour isn't exactly my idea of fun.”

“Pleeeeeease? It won't be the same without you.” She bats her eyes and pouts her lips, begging like a puppy. “It's not very far. It's just on the other side of campus. We can walk.”

How can I refuse that face? Besides, Ryker told me he can't meet up tonight. There are last-minute preparations for the bonding ceremony, including adding placement of the extra security. He has a private call with his mother, who arrives tomorrow. God help me, I know I'm going to have to meet her and I'm not ready for that. Dating a prince is one thing. Meeting a queen who will undoubtedly disapprove of me? That doesn't sound like a lot of fun.

After the disaster that was my tryout with Hel the other day, which seems to have had zero effect on Beth's party mood tonight, I'm worn out.

The top secret, epic disaster is, of course, the hot topic of conversation for every student on campus. Although, the teachers don't seem to have a clue. I'm glad. I really don't want Beth to get into trouble for trying to help me. As long as she's okay, I'm fine with pretending it never happened.

And if I am part of Hel's bloodline? No thanks. I'd rather walk around as a total failure at healing than go through that again. Beth and Ryker both said I could try again—minus the ancient warrior bit—but I am nowhere near ready to even think about it. That warrior's loud grumblings creeped me out. After the nightmares I've had my entire life, that is not easy to do.

If I don't go with Beth, I'll be sitting here all night worrying about the ceremony and Ryker, feeling sorry for myself because I can't seem to do anything right, and wondering about all the fun I'm missing. Besides, I did finish high school. I deserve to celebrate. I passed Ms. Shaw's stupid history class and Forsetta Academy officially accepted my old transcript, so I am going to get a diploma with everyone else, just not a ravenborn of my own. Which is another problem I don't want to think about right now. How am I supposed to choose someone to spend two or three hundred years with when I don't know anything about any of them? It truly is worse than getting married, and I thought that decision would give me a heart attack someday. Hah.

"Come on. Everyone is going to be there."

"How is it that the teachers are just going to ignore a party on school property?"

"It's tradition." As if those two words explain everything.

"Ugh, fine." I toss my phone onto my bed and stand up. "But only if we can leave early. Someone told me the grad party last year lasted until the sun came up." They didn't just inform me; they were actually bragging about it.

“Deal!” Her response is so enthusiastic I would have been tempted to believe her if it weren’t for her devilish grin.

We are *definitely* not returning to our suite at a reasonable hour.

She turns the music back up to its original volume and dances away while she picks her outfit. Rolling my eyes, I go back to my closet and start pulling out clothes, too. If I’m going to this party, I might as well look decent. And if we’re out really late, maybe Ryker will get done with whatever it is he has to do and come find me.

If he does, I can’t look like I just rolled out of bed and threw on a pair of sweats.

I scan through my options, and my hand brushes against something soft and silky. I pull out a dress I forgot I had, a deep, ruby red that accentuates my curves perfectly. Slipping the fabric over my head, I adjust the spaghetti straps as I look for the matching pumps. I find them and shove my feet through the crisscross, sparkling straps.

I walk out of my room with a twirl. Beth looks over at me and whistles. “Fuck yeah! We’re gonna turn some heads tonight!”

I can’t help but laugh—her enthusiasm is contagious. I start on my makeup, opting for a classic red lipstick, a touch of dramatics around the eyes, and a shimmering glitter finishing powder. My cheeks sparkle, even in the dull suite lighting. I love it.

I am shoving my make-up back in the bag as my vision goes fuzzy. The room spins. I clutch the side of the vanity to steady myself. I close my eyes, but that makes the tilting floor worse, so I stare at my reflection instead. The confusion I see in the mirror is exactly what I’m feeling. Good job, face.

What the hell?

When I look into the mirror again, the dizzy spell is already gone. In its place, a pounding headache. My head feels like a balloon that is about to pop because its internal pressure is too high.

“Ready to go?” Beth calls out from her closet.

“Yeah, just give me a minute.” I put my makeup away and rustle through my desk drawers to find the pain killers I stashed when I first moved in. No way am I letting a headache ruin the fun I just decided I want to have.

I swallow the pills and rinse them down with water. Beth is waiting by the door in a pair of ripped black jeans and a crop top with a leather jacket. I envy her distinctive sense of style. Her makeup is total Cleopatra with shimmering green and blue powder and the long, sweeping eyeliner for effect. She looks amazing.

Beth hands me a shot of whiskey. “Bottoms up!” she shouts, as we clink our glasses together.

“Where did you get this?” I stare at her and the drink incredulously. I imagine it’s pretty hard to smuggle alcohol into a school with security as tight as this.

“That’s not important.” She rolls her eyes, dismissing my question and motioning for me to stop sipping and down it. Her glass is already empty.

“But I just took a pain killer.”

She waves her hand, dismissive. “I do it all the time. You’ll be fine.”

All the time? Just how often does she mix alcohol and pain meds? But then again, we’re not exactly human.

If I’m going out, I might as well do it right. I down the shot in one go, and grimace as it burns my throat. It warms my stomach and I cough, trying to get the taste off my tongue. “That’s so gross.”

Beth pats me on the back. “That is what we drink around here. Akvavit. We’ll get you used to it.”

Used to it? “It’s tastes like spicy vodka.”

“It’s Norwegian. That means it’s better.” She downs a second shot of what I realize is the same liquor they pour in the chalice as their offering to Hel, and smacks me on the back. “We have good beer, too. You’ll see.”

How often does she plan on partying until dawn while dragging me along? I'm pretty sure tonight she's going to be the type of "bad influence" my parents warned me to stay away from when I was in middle school.

We head out and walk across the field toward a park-like area that is right next to the school's protective barrier. Beth is ahead of me, skipping and enjoying the cool night breeze, and I linger just behind her, the calm to her excited storm.

I listen to the crickets chirping, and the way our feet crunch against the stone path. In the distance, I hear a bird call —

My head splits in two, like a dagger has been shoved between my eyes. Dull flashes of hazy red light and fractured screams invade my senses. I double over, unable to continue. As quickly as they come, they disappear, almost as though they were shoved out of my brain.

I heave and clutch my head. The vision fragments might be gone, but the stabbing pain remains.

"Are you okay?" Beth walks over to me and removes my hand from my head.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just have a headache."

She's suspicious but accepts my answer. "Okay. You sure you wanna come?"

I nod. I don't want to be alone in my room tonight. Not when there is a possibility my head might explode. If I have a brain bleed or something really bad, I don't want to be by myself. "Of course."

She wraps her arm around my own and pulls me forward, both supporting me and forcing me to walk. We spend the remainder of the walk chatting about summer classes and how we should decorate our suite.

The party is in full swing when we arrive. Music blares from large speakers. The smell of alcohol, sweat, and smoke mix in the air. There are string lights wrapped around the trees, illuminating the area in a warm glow. Ravenborn and legacies

alike dance and drink, talking and laughing, celebrating their soon-to-be graduation and bonding ceremonies.

It looks like almost the entire senior class, most of the juniors, and a few graduates from last year have shown up—I even spot Octavia on the other side of the party. Her hair is piled on top of her head in a complex braid that makes her look like a queen. The dress she’s wearing has long sleeves, but the fabric is so stretchy that I can see the muscles in her shoulders move as she moves. She’s flirting with someone I’ve never seen before. He looks older. I wonder where he came from, where a lot of these boys came from in a school that’s mostly ladies.

Oh, well. There is only one guy I care about. I crane my neck, searching for Ryker, but don’t see him. I wonder if he’s going to show up? He said he would text me when he was free. Maybe I should text him to tell him I decided to come to this party.

“Come on!” Beth grabs my arm and pulls me towards the crowd. I stumble, tripping over my own feet. I can’t tell if my lack of grace is because Beth yanked on my arm, or because my head feels like a pin cushion, or the buzz from that first shot hit my empty stomach. Probably all three.

We dance for a bit, bobbing to the pounding electronic bass, until Beth suddenly stops. “What’s wrong with you?”

“What do you mean?” I shout over the speakers.

“Loosen up!”

She’s right. My shoulders are way too tight, and my jaw is clenched. And this pounding, louder-than-life bass, combined with my exploding headache? I’m miserable, but I don’t want to go back to the dorm. I want my head to stop hurting so I can have some fun. The pain pills have to kick in, eventually. I’m sticking it out. “You’re right. Sorry.”

Beth holds up her index finger in the universal symbol for ‘I’ve got an idea’ and walks away.

“Beth! Where are you going?” She ignores me.

Before long, I've lost sight of her in the crowd, and I'm alone in a sea of people I don't know very well. I don't even recognize most of them. Side stepping to the beat, hoping to make myself feel a little less awkward, I try to blend in.

A male body comes up behind me. After the initial contact, he starts dancing and grinding on me. I spin around. This guy is invading my very personal space. "What the hell?"

"Hey beautiful. I've seen you around." The culprit is some random guy I've seen once or twice around campus. Based on how hazy his eyes are, I would bet good money he's more than a few drinks in. Or high. Maybe both. "You've got a nice ass."

Ew. I try to shove him away to give myself some space, but he keeps coming onto me. I put one hand in the center of his chest and force him to remain at arm's length. "Do you mind?"

He completely ignores my question, swaying back and forth with the music, as if that will make him more enticing. "Wanna find someplace quiet? Have some fun?" His words slur into one another in a lazy jumble. Just like his hands, which clumsily reach for my body.

"No. I don't." I slap his hand away and wince in pain as my headache flares up again. I double over and wrap one arm around my waist as sights and sounds overwhelm me. Sharp, burning agony, like someone shoved a hot poker into my temple, blinds me for a moment. I've never had a headache this bad. Ever.

I sense movement and shift my body away from his outstretched arm.

"You okay?"

"Back off." Vision clearing, I take a step back, but he follows. At least he doesn't try to touch me again.

He has his hands up in the universal sign for surrender. "Sorry. Take it easy. I just thought you were hot."

"Don't touch me." Maybe I should kick him in the nuts. It would do him some good, maybe even teach him some manners.

Beth comes back, drinks in hand, and dramatically gags when she sees my predicament. “Get lost, David. And *do* try to keep it in your pants. You’ll be doing everybody a favor.”

His drunk face crunches up in offense. “Whatever, necro.” Without another word, he stumbles back and disappears into the crowd, probably to go puke on some unsuspecting partygoer.

I turn to Beth, eyes wide with relief. “Who was that?”

“Don’t waste time thinking about him. He’s a sleaze.” She hands me a beer. “All the descendants of Sjöfn are like that. Horny *constantly*. They are literally obsessed with sex. They make up the largest proportion of the student body, for obvious reasons.”

I digest that news. “Well, at least dating one of them would be...exciting.”

Beth laughs. “Oh, yeah. They have a reputation. But they are also notorious for cheating. Most of them never get married. They literally can’t keep it in their pants.”

Well, that is interesting. Based on that information, I think I can cross Sjöfn off my list. I’ve only been in love once in my life, and when he’s not around, I absolutely do not want to jump every man I see.

Beth raises her cup in salute. “Anyway, drink up. Let’s get this party started.”

I sip the beer and grimace. It’s never been my favorite drink. I imagine the taste is what dog piss mixed with burned coffee grounds would be. But the headache is still eating me alive, and I would really love to stop thinking so much, at least for a while. I bite the bullet and down the entire beer in one go.

“Damn, you mean business! I can’t fall behind.” Beth laughs, eyes alight, and chugs hers as well. She crumples the red plastic cup in victory when she’s done and hollers. “Hell, yeah!”

We dance and drink, giving into the moment. I’m determined to have a good time, and for once, I’m not

worrying about gods or homework or draug. The alcohol has muted my headache to a dull roar. My body feels warm and relaxed. It's a refreshing change of pace.

I don't know how much time passes, but eventually she stops dancing and slaps me on the arm, pointing behind me.

"Ow, that hurts." I drunkenly reprimand her and slap her back in the same place.

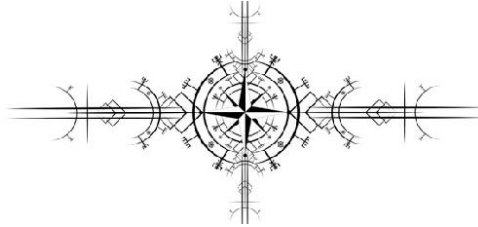
"Shaddup. Look!" She stumbles as she walks past me, pointing the entire way. Doesn't she not know it's rude to point?

I turn to follow her, opening my mouth to complain, but stop in my tracks. Ryker and Zelik are walking up to the party, eyes locked on me and Beth.

"Ohmygod." I attempt to flatten my hair and straighten out my dress. "Do I look okay?" I feel hot and sweaty, and I know for a fact my face is flushed from the effects of the alcohol.

She rolls her eyes and grabs me by the wrist, leading me toward them. "Woman, you know he's head over heels already. You're totally fine."

THIRTY-SEVEN



Zelik and Ryker grin, eyebrows raised, as Beth and I stumble over to them, giggling the entire way.

“Hi.” Ryker holds my gaze, eyes dancing with amusement. I can only imagine what he must be thinking. His golden blue gaze lingers on my face for a few moments, on my flushed cheeks and red lipstick. His gaze wanders down, stalling where my dress strap is sliding off my shoulder. He unashamedly takes in my curves—making my cheeks burn from nothing even remotely related to alcohol—before finally returning to meet my eyes again.

“Hi.” I’m not sure the greeting is loud enough for him to hear me. Doesn’t matter. Tension rises between us as he devours me with his eyes. I bite my lip as I return the favor, taking my time admiring his chiseled jawline and broad shoulders. His dark hair is styled in a messy, sexy way that makes my fingers itch to run through it. He’s wearing a sleek leather jacket that fits him like a glove, and I’m suddenly, painfully aware of how close we are, and how much I want him.

“Hey, took you long enough,” Beth slurs, interrupting the intense moment. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

Zelik snickers, glancing between me and Beth. “Yeah, looks like it.” His blond hair seems particularly untamed and looks like it’s still damp from a shower. His lightweight sweater and jeans look a bit more casual than Ryker’s leather jacket, but he looks good enough that I catch Beth giving him a very thorough inspection.

Ryker clears his throat. “I’m glad you’re here. I didn’t want to come without you.”

My heart skips a beat at the sound of his voice. I can’t help but feel weak in the knees when he speaks to me. “Yeah, Beth convinced me. I couldn’t miss out on all the fun.”

“Damn straight! And you two,” Beth points at Ryker and Zelik, “need to be a *little* tipsy to catch up with the rest of us. I’m gonna get you drinks!”

She ambles away and returns two minutes later with two full cups in her hands. Ryker and Zelik clink the plastic cups together before downing the contents.

“Woo!” I clap my hands together enthusiastically, cheering them on. I didn’t think they would be the type to drink. I guess everyone, even the prince and his right hand, came here to let loose tonight.

Stumbling forward, I grab Ryker’s arm, pressing my chest against his bicep. I pull him toward the gyrating crowd of dancing, drunk, almost-college students. “Come onnnn! Let’s dance.”

Ryker’s cheeks pinken as I drag him along while maintaining maximum amounts of skin-to-skin contact.

“Oh, oh! Good idea, Dani!” Beth grabs Zelik by the wrist and leads him into the crowd at the same time.

For a while, we all dance together, but at some point, Zelik and Beth get lost in the crowd, and it’s just me and Ryker. His hands find my hips, and we sway together to the beat of the music. I can feel the heat radiating from his body, and it’s intoxicating. I’ve never felt this way before about anyone. I’ve never felt this level of attraction, this level of desire.

Our bodies move together. We’re in sync. It’s like we’re two halves of a whole, two puzzle pieces that fit perfectly together. I can feel his breath on my neck, his lips dangerously close to mine. I close my eyes, letting myself get lost in the moment.

“Dani,” he whispers, his voice husky and low.

“Hmm?” I tilt my head back, looking up at him.

“I-” He pauses, his eyes searching mine. “I want to kiss you.”

Without hesitation, I lean up, pressing my lips to his. A spark ignites between us, a fire that burns hot and bright. His hands tighten on my hips, and I wrap my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss.

The desire coursing through my veins is stronger than any alcohol. Ryker’s lips are soft and warm, and I can’t get enough of him. I want him hot and on edge like this, all the time, every time he’s close. Usually, when he touches me, I hold back. I’m responsible and respectful and always waiting for the moment to feel right.

Every part of me is pressed to his strength, his heat, and it’s not enough.

We break apart, gasping for air, our foreheads resting against each other.

“Wow,” he whispers, his hand caressing my cheek.

“Yeah,” I reply, breathless, heart pounding in my chest.

The music fades into the background. All I can focus on is Ryker. The heat between us is palpable, and my body hums in response to him.

“Let’s go somewhere quieter,” he suggests, his hand still on my cheek.

I nod, unable to form words. He takes my hand, leading me out of the party crowd and into the cool night air.

We walk in silence, our hands intertwined, away from the thumping bass and drunk dancers. As soon as we’re far enough away that we can’t be easily spotted, he turns, pinning me against a large oak tree, his eyes so dark he looks primal and a little dangerous.

I reach for him. Ryker leans in and kisses me. This time, it’s even more intense than before. His hands roam over my body, tracing the curves of my waist and hips. I moan softly into his mouth, my body responding to his touch.

In one swift motion, Ryker lifts me up, my legs wrapped around his waist. He kisses me with such intensity that I feel like I'm drowning in him. My dress slips up above my waist, and Ryker grinds his hips against me, causing me to gasp in pleasure. I can feel the hardness of his body pressing against me, and I can't help but want more.

"Ry...", I moan his name, wrapping my arms tighter around his neck.

His only response is a soft groan as he moves one hand up to cup my breast through my dress.

I arch my back, use the tree for leverage so I can push my breast into his hand. I want him to touch me, to explore every inch of my body.

I devour his lips, one hand buried in his hair. I lock him to me, tugging at his shirt, desperate for more. I know what happens next. I know all about the mechanics of sex. I've never wanted to be that close to someone before, never been so breathless, or shaky, or hot.

Ryker pulls away, panting heavily, his forehead resting against mine. "God, I want you," he breathes.

"I want you, too," I whisper back.

He lowers my feet to the ground but doesn't let go of me. We stand there, our bodies pressed together, as my pounding pulse begins to slow. "Why did you stop?"

"Dani," he murmurs against my ear, "This isn't right. You're drunk. I'm tipsy. Let's just...cool down a bit. I love you too much to mess this up." Ever so slowly, he steps back. He replaces the straps of my dress so that they sit on my shoulders, and I pull my dress back down my thighs. He watches every move. I'm tempted to reach for him until he steps back and gives me that heart-stopping grin. "I'm gonna go see if I can find us some water."

I stand there, fingers tracing my lips in a lust-induced haze, so it takes a hot minute to register what I just heard.

He *loves* me?

My heart races as I watch him walk away, his silhouette disappearing into the darkness. Did he really just say he loves me? It's almost too much to process in my alcohol-riddled brain, but those words... They fill me with an inexplicable joy I've never felt before. Bubbles of happiness rise inside me until it feels like I'm floating. I love him. I've known for a while. With him, I can't believe how right this feels, like it's destiny or fate or a dream.

But...I didn't get the chance to say it back. I push off the tree trunk on a mission: find Ryker and tell him I love him. I need to tell him. I want him to know.

I cross the uneven ground, bracing myself on tree trunks and stepping around bushes on my way back to the party. I arrive on the edge of the crowd and crane my neck, trying to find Ryker in the sea of faces.

Where is he? I pass a few intimate conversations and stand on the outskirts of the dancing mob when I hear something strange. I think it might be thunder, until it happens again.

A guttural, phlegmy roar sends an instant chill down my spine, shattering my warm and cozy Ryker buzz. Birds from the surrounding trees take flight, abandoning their nests in the dead of night in a wild flap of wings.

My feet freeze and my heart stops in its tracks as a second, identical roar is clearly audible from a slightly different direction. The bellow blasts through the area, despite the music and chatter. Everyone, even the few who are high as a kite, freeze in a silent standstill, their instincts roaring that something is wrong.

Someone lowers the volume of the music. Tension fills the air as everyone listens.

Please, no. Please, no. Please, no.

No one hears my silent chant. My heavy breathing is like a tornado in my ears. My pulse pounds, each beat audible inside my head. Five heartbeats later, a gargling hiss claws at my mind as visions of prom night, of the claws and blood, lash at my senses.

All around me, students scan for the source of the bone-chilling noise, murmuring to one another. They don't look scared, just confused.

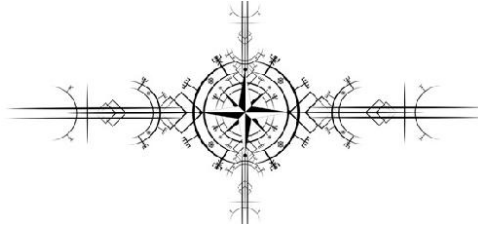
They don't know.

All color drains from my face. I know that sound. It is unforgettable, unmistakable. I've heard it in my dreams, and in my waking hours. I shake myself out of my frozen terror and tell myself to pull myself together as I acknowledge the inescapable truth. I know what's coming.

“Draug! Run!” My throat burns as I scream the warning.

I'm too late. A draug jumps out of the darkness, landing just steps in front of a group of ravenborn. Terror-filled shouts fill the air as it stalks toward the drunk students. Just like the others I've seen, it creeps forward on all fours, the fingers and feet sticking out of its mangled, rotting body twitch with every movement. Its goo drips and sizzles where the thick globs land on the ground and contaminate everything it touches, filling the air with the distinct smell of decomposing flesh.

THIRTY-EIGHT



The ravenborn fumble around, picking up loose sticks and throwing rocks. They try to find anything they can use as a weapon. If they were fully bonded ravenborn, and strong enough, they could manifest their divine weapon. As it stands, they're unbound, powers not activated, and drunk.

The few legacies who try to fight back aren't faring any better. A couple shoot fire from their hands. I see a few lightning bolts. Students gape in obvious horror as the draug absorb the attacks, and the divine energy, like dry sponges soaking up water.

What kind of insane creature absorbs lightning?

Now I understand why Odin created the Valkyrie. His descendants, on their own, don't stand a chance in hell against these things.

Two more draug creep up on the sides of the party. We're boxed in on three sides as more panicked screams echo in the night. One more and we'll be surrounded.

A blonde girl I've seen in math class gets tossed across the clearing, screaming in pain. She crumbles when she hits the ground and doesn't move. I assume she's been knocked unconscious because I refuse to believe she's dead. I can't deal with that right now. A group of students with makeshift weapons attack, but they are swatted away with one swipe of a deadly claw.

No, no, no, no. This can't be happening. We're still inside the school barrier! How did they get in? Why are they

attacking now?

I stumble backward and fall to the ground as I try to crawl away from the draug. Where's Ryker? What about Beth and Zelik? What's going to happen to them? Are they still alive?

Shit shit *shit*.

I stumble clumsily, and each step I take threatens to send me toppling over. My vision blurs and the edges of the world become fuzzy. I'm suffocating. My head spins until I don't know which way the party is, where I am, or what direction I'm facing. More screams tear at me, but I'm too dizzy to be of any help. I can barely walk.

If a draug finds me right now, I won't even be able to run.

I call out, desperate to find Ryker. The draug snarls grow louder with each passing second.

What do I do? What *can* I do? We're all going to be killed, helpless as lambs led to slaughter. I'm going to die without ever getting the chance to tell Ryker how I feel. Without seeing my parents again. They're never going to know what happened to me. I'll become one of the pictures in Ava's manila envelopes.

Suddenly, from somewhere deep inside me, a voice cuts through the panic; soothing, calm, and so clear it somehow slows my raging heart. The woman's words whisper through me like a soft caress. Somehow, I know the voice is not mine. Someone, or something, is talking to me.

Look around. Pay attention.

Tears still stream down my face, but my breath calms with every passing second. I lift my head, grateful that whatever this voice is, it is making the world stop spinning. Now that I can focus, I assess the chaos from a more objective point of view. The voice is right—what I'm seeing doesn't make any sense.

Yes, students are screaming, and crying, and being tossed around, but no one is being killed, or gutted, or cut to pieces by deadly claws. The draug's movements are quite slow and predictable, and they aren't pressing their advantage, even

when someone is vulnerable. I've seen how they behave when they want to kill, and this isn't it.

According to what I've been told, the barrier around campus has never failed before, which makes this even weirder. I vividly recall the way the draug on Astavar's car bounced off the barrier when we drove through. It was like they hit a solid wall going a hundred miles an hour.

There is no way they broke through. So how did they get on campus? Did someone let them in?

Is all of this just a distraction?

Yes.

Both the voice and my instincts tell me I'm right. But why?

The crisp, cool sound of the woman's voice sweeps through my mind like a cool breeze. I hold on to a tree for balance and watch as the school's security team storms onto the scene. Some students must have made it back to school and told the ravenborn guard about the attack. Chaos surges around me. I stand still, eyes peeled for the odd man out.

Come on, Dani. Find it.

I try—look everywhere I can think to look—but I can't spot anything through the pandemonium. I beg the voice that spoke to me to help me out just one more time. Then, almost like a little tap on my shoulder, my attention is pulled to the left, and I see him.

A man wearing dark pants, with a hoodie pulled up over his head, slinks away from the party and starts walking toward the center of campus. He glances back over his shoulder at the horror movie playing out in front of me as light from one of the buildings illuminates his features.

I know him. I've seen him somewhere before.

I take off after him, trying to stay back far enough that he doesn't notice he has a shadow. I follow him over deserted paths and realize he is heading toward the main building.

A brief flash of light hits the bottom half of his face, and another memory rises inside me. I know that crooked nose. That's the same man I saw when I visited Isabella at the hospital. He was the one standing outside on the sidewalk, staring up at her. And he was in the car parked outside my parents' house.

What is he doing here?

Has he been following me? And if so, what is he doing here now?

My heart races as I am forced into a slow jog to keep up. Who is he? Did he let the draug in? What is his endgame? Is he the one that is planning to kill Ryker? Thoughts tumble over one another in my mind as I move through the shadows, trying to be quiet. I almost trip over a loose cobblestone, still tipsy enough to be clumsy, but catch myself in time. The man doesn't look back, but my heart pounds in my chest like a drum.

After what feels like an eternity, he stops in front of the administration building. He pauses in front of the door and glances around. I duck behind a nearby tree and watch as he pulls out an ID card to unlock the door.

I count to ten before following him, doing my very best to open and close the door as quietly as possible. It takes me a moment to figure out he went into the stairwell across from the entrance, my only clue a faint light moving across the wall.

I descend the stairs in complete silence, using the handrail to steady myself, the metal slick against my sweaty palms. Four flights of stairs later, I reach the bottom of the staircase and freeze, pressing my back against the wall as I hear shuffling noises. I wait until I can't hear him anymore and then peek around the corner. I'm just in time to see his shadow disappear behind a steel reinforced, windowless door at the end of a long hallway.

The moment he's gone, I sneak after him, cursing silently when I discover that the door isn't just locked, but has a fingerprint scanner.

What is this place?

I crouch behind a corner at the opposite end of the hallway and make myself comfortable, waiting. There are more bio-security locked doors down here. I don't know how much time passes, could be two minutes or twenty. I pull out my phone when I hear the door locks click. I want to capture the intruder on video. I zoom in on the door as he steps out carrying the Gods' Eye.

I know that relic. I've held it in my hands.

The crystal orb is glowing, not as brightly as it did when Attie tested me, but enough to be easily spotted in the dark.

I watch in shock as he wraps a dark cloth around it and slips it inside his jacket. He is stealing the relic right out from under everyone's noses. His movements are unhurried as he heads back down the hallway and enters the stairwell. His nonchalant confidence is either incredibly stupid, or a sign that he's not worried about ravenborn suddenly returning to their post.

I *really* hope it's the first option. The second would mean he is working with some of the ravenborn, that they are helping him pull this off.

I remain hidden and wait until I hear the thief exit the stairwell before following. Maybe once I'm back outside, I can yell for help and get someone's attention. Following him was risky, and I feel like I'm running on borrowed luck as it is.

The building is silent when I reach the upper hallway. Everything spins around me, so I brace myself with one hand on the wall. Rising nausea reminds me just how much alcohol I've had tonight.

Damn it. I was feeling so much better. Why do I feel worse now than I did before? It doesn't make sense. It's like the stupid voice in my head helped me just enough to follow the thief, then dumped everything back into my system with double the yuck.

With a groan I can't stop, I shove off the wall and force myself back outside. Fresh air eases my nausea, but the night

feels even darker, more sinister, than it did before.

Maybe it's the silence where I expect to hear screams. Maybe it's the fact that the thief seems to have vanished into thin air. I look in every direction and find no trace of him.

I have to tell Ryker about the Gods' Eye. When I finally make it back to the others, I'm greeted by organized chaos. Ravenborn guards and the older legacies are barking orders. The draug are gone, but the damage they've done is horrifying. Injured students are everywhere, some crying, some staring at nothing as Klaus and the other healers move among them. Furniture has been smashed, pieces strewn all over the ground. I spot Ryker, Mirre, and Astavar in the distance, looking harried as they take stock of the situation.

"Dani!" Ryker spots me hobbling toward him and excuses himself from his conversation to run to me. He cups my cheeks in his hands and searches my body for any sign of injury. "Are you okay? Where were you?"

"I'm fine." I lean into his touch, the warmth of his palms a relief. "What about you?" I frown at a cut along his jawlines. The shallow mark seeps blood.

"Also fine." He pulls me in and hugs me fiercely. "Where were you? I looked everywhere. You scared the shit out of me."

"I'm sorry." The embrace only lasts a second before I pull back. "I was in the basement of the main building. I followed a man there. He stole the Gods' Eye."

"What?"

"You're bleeding." I click my tongue in disapproval and reach up to run my finger along his cut without thinking twice. He winces in pain as my finger makes contact with the wound. Heat rises in my chest and travels down my arms into my fingers. A faint glow emanates from the point of contact. My finger travels the length of the cut and comes away bloody, but the skin underneath is smooth.

His hand rises to his face, tracing the newly healed skin. His brows furrow, confused. "So you can only heal on instinct

when you're with me?"

Hell if I know. I have zero explanation. I don't know how I just did what I did, or why it came so easy to me. "I guess you just bring out the best in me. Or something." I want to tell him I love him, but it doesn't feel right, not with so much pain and chaos on all sides.

He steps forward, kissing my forehead gingerly, his lips lingering. "Ugh, that's so cheesy."

I give him a playful push. "Hey. I like cheese."

"Oh, I know."

I scan the crowd, craning my neck to see above heads. "Do you know where Beth and Zelik are?"

He nods. "Yeah, they're fine. They've been wandering around helping the injured students." He's quiet for a moment, but he's thinking, I can see it in his eyes. "You said someone stole the Gods' Eye?"

"Yes. I saw him lurking in the trees when the draug attacked, so I followed him."

"You followed him. You never should have done that. It's too dangerous."

"I was careful."

His snort of disbelief makes me grin.

"Okay, so maybe it wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done, but I followed him. He went to the administration building, down four flights of stairs into a hall with a bunch of doors that have fingerprint scanners." My explanation makes him tense.

"He went to the vault."

"That's what I figured. So I waited in the hall and took a video when he came out. He had the Gods' Eye. He wrapped a cloth around it to hide the glow and walked out like he owned the place." I reach for my phone. "Here, look."

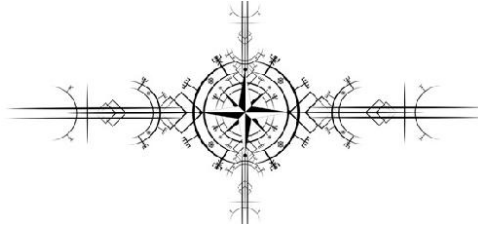
I pull up the video file and push play.

The entire screen is a blob of darkness, a faint glow for a few seconds, and then more shadows. “Shit. It was too dark down there.” I look up at him. “You have to believe me. Someone stole it. Why would anyone do that?”

He shakes his head and looks over his shoulder to where Astavar and Mirre stand speaking to a few ravenborn. “I don’t know, but they might.”

My stomach drops. I’m drunk, exhausted, and about to be interrogated by the asshole and a two-hundred-year-old warrior with exactly zero sense of humor.

THIRTY-NINE



Ryker holds my hand as we wait with Astavar and Mirre. The hallway hasn't changed since I was here less than an hour ago. Same doors, same locks, very different reason for being here.

I hear Attie before I see her. The distinct clicking of her high heels on the hard floors doesn't miss a beat. When she appears in a black business skirt, dark gray blouse and black suit jacket, she looks more severe than I have ever seen her. I guess the color matches her mood. I know it matches mine.

"It's the middle of the night. I have injured students in the infirmary and parents making my phone ring off the hook." She looks from Ryker to me, then to Astavar. Finally, her gaze settles on Mirre. "You said it was important, Mirre. I'm here."

"We need to get into the vault."

"Astavar has full access." Attie taps her shiny black toes on the floor.

"When you locked down campus, the overrides kicked in. You're the only one who can get in until the reset is complete." Astavar explains in a calm, apologetic voice.

Attie huffs in annoyance but moves to the door. She scans her badge, then places three fingers on the scanner. "Mirre told me you believe the Gods' Eye has been taken."

Mirre moves forward as the door slides open. "Yes. Ms. Price claims to have seen a strange man sneak inside the building during the draug attack."

“Indeed?” Attie glances over her shoulder at me. “And you followed him? Alone?”

Okay, when she says it like that, it does sound like a stupid decision. “Everything was so chaotic, I didn’t really think. I saw him and I was suspicious, so I followed him down here.” I pointed to the dark room faintly visible beyond the now open door. “He disappeared into that room. When he came out, he had the Gods’ Eye in his hands. It was glowing, so he wrapped a blanket or something around it and ran off.”

Astavar clears his throat. “And where were you when all this occurred?”

I walk to my former hiding place and point. “I was hiding right here.” I look Attie in the eye. I’m telling the truth. “Watched him from right here.”

“Very well.” Attie turns back to the door. “Let’s go see if the relic is missing.”

We all file in after her. I admit, I’m disappointed. The super-secret, high security vault is a bare room with plain walls, no scanners, gadgets, or red lasers, just a rectangular table against the far wall. On top of the table is a large chest made of metal, not wood, and has a lock. Still, I expected some high tech, cool, magical, spy shit. This is lame.

Attie makes quick work of the lock and lifts the metal lid. That done, she steps back and looks at Astavar, clearly expecting him to lift out whatever is inside.

I’m not surprised when he lifts a wooden chest and places it on the table in front of the much larger metal one. Without pause, he opens the wooden chest and steps aside so we all have a clear view of its contents.

The Gods’ Eye is nestled in the center, intact and perfect.

What? “I don’t understand. That’s not possible.” I look at Ryker, begging him to believe me. “I saw someone take it. I swear to you. I’m not lying.”

“That could be a forgery.” Mirre’s unexpected comment has me spinning to face her.

“Yes. We need to test it.” I take two steps toward the relic when Ryker’s arms come around me from behind and lift me off my feet.

“Not you. It’s too dangerous.”

I relax in his arms, not willing to argue.

“He is correct. This could be a trap. I will test the relic.” Mirre steps forward and places her bare palm on top of the orb. I hold my breath, but nothing happens.

Mirre steps away and Attie moves forward to place her own hand on the crystal. When it remains dead as plain glass, she removes her hand and turns to me. “Ryker tells me you are an excellent artist.”

Ryker, his arms still around me, squeezes me in a gentle hug as I look over my shoulder and into his eyes. “He did?” Warm fuzzies spread through me at the praise. I don’t know why it matters to me that he told Attie I was good, but it totally does.

“Dani, can you recreate the face of the man who took the relic tonight? Can you draw a picture of him?”

I think about the moment I saw part of his face flash at me from under his hood. I close my eyes and bring up an image of him watching Isabella at the hospital and realize he’s the same man who parked cross the street from my house, in that white car. I merge the three versions of him in my head. “I think so. I can try.”

Attie takes the glass orb and hands it to Astavar. “Get rid of this trash.”

Astavar practically races out of the room.

Attie turns on her heel as if she is going to leave. Instead, she stops next to me and places a hand on my shoulder. “Do it quickly. The bonding ceremony is in a little over twelve hours. We are running out of time.”

Seven hours later, I crumple the latest version of mystery man's face into a ball and toss it against the wall of our living room. I would have aimed for the trash, but that's already full.

Beth sighs and brings me a steaming cup of tea. I thank her and take a sip. It's good, but it's not enough. I need industrial strength coffee. I haven't slept, the ceremony is an a few hours, and every time I try to draw that man's face, it's like my brain goes blank. Literally, fucking blank.

"This is ridiculous!" I glance down to see another half finished, formless man's face on a piece of paper. Somehow, this one is still attached to my sketch book's binding. I rip it off, wad it up, and toss it into the pile on the floor.

This has never happened to me before. Ever. It's like my memory is malfunctioning. I can recall Ryker's face perfectly, every gorgeous detail. Beth? No problem. Zelik? Octavia? Nini? Even Attie. I could sit here and draw any one of them with ease. So what is happening? When I was in the vault, I saw him in my head. It was easy. Now it's like trying to see through fog.

"You need to take a break." Beth sits down next to me on the sofa. She had a nice, long nap and has only been up a couple hours.

"I don't have time." I look at the clock. "The ceremony is in a few hours and Attie wanted to give all the ravenborn a copy of the thief's face so the security teams could watch out for him."

"I know. But you need sleep, Dani."

I lean forward and put my face in my hands. "I know, but I have to do this first."

A soft knock on the door barely registers. When Beth gets up to open the door, I have to blink a few times before Ryker's face comes into focus. Jeez, I'm even more tired than I

thought. Ryker turns to Beth and nods. My roommate, the sneaky wench, thanks him for coming and disappears inside her room.

“Beth called you?”

“She did.” Ryker takes her place on the sofa and inspects the mound of discarded paper balls. “You do all that since the vault?”

I snort. “Yeah, not that it’s done any good.” I put my sketchbook and pencil down on the coffee table and sit back. “When we were with Attie, and she asked me if I could draw his face, I saw him in my mind, clear as day.”

“But?”

“But now when I try to find him, it’s like someone erased him from my mind.” I am so frustrated I want to throw things, but restrain myself. “Is there a legacy power that can do that? Could someone be messing with me?”

Like that voice I heard last night?

Ryker’s blank stare tells me nothing, and I’m too impatient to wait for his answer.

“Because that’s what it feels like. It’s like someone literally took an eraser and scrubbed his face out of my head.” I rub my temples. The headache has been there for hours. I’ve been blaming it on stress, alcohol consumption and lack of sleep. But what if it’s more than that?

Ryker leans back and lifts his arm, giving me a place to snuggle in next to him. I take him up on it and settle my head against his shoulder. After the last few hours, this is heaven on Earth.

“Yes, there are gods who can manipulate memories. Those powers usually manifest in one of the gods associated with wisdom and learning, but there are a few others who would be suspect as well.”

“Are any of their legacies at this school?”

“Of course.”

At last, an answer that makes sense to me. Because seeing things is one of my superpowers. I refuse to believe, when I need it most, my ability to see things is just... gone.

“Can you do your truth thing and check out my head? I think someone is blocking me.”

Ryker has me get a pillow and rest my head my head on his lap. When his hand comes down and covers my forehead, I close my eyes and try to relax. It’s not difficult, not with Ryker here.

I feel the moment his power enters my body, the flow like warm, melted caramel sticking to my insides. There is a flash of stabbing pain inside my head, but it’s gone almost as quickly as it comes.

After several minutes, I open my eyes to see Ryker staring down at me, frowning. “Well? Did you find anything?”

“Yes. I did. I pushed through, making your mind accept only truth. The power ran before I could recognize it, but I don’t think you’re going to get those memories back. I think they’re gone for good.”

I sigh. “That’s not good. Attie’s going to be so disappointed.”

He runs his fingers through my hair, and I bliss out. “Let me worry about Attie. You rest.”

If I can’t draw that stupid man anyway, I might as well take a nap. “Don’t leave without waking me up.”

“I promise.”

I drift away with one of his hands anchoring me to reality where it rests just below my neck. The fingers of his other hand move soothingly through my hair. It feels so good, and I’m so tired, I don’t even have time to appreciate how great he is before drifting off to sleep.

I don’t know how long I sleep, but when Ryker shakes my shoulder to wake me, I feel like it was five whole minutes. “How long was I asleep?”

“Four hours.”

What the hell? “You sat here with me for four hours?”

“Yeah. I would stay longer, but I have to go get ready. The bonding ceremony is about to start, and I have to get dressed and meet the other officials.”

“What?” I’m awake now. “No. They have to cancel the ceremony. You have to convince them. We didn’t figure out my visions, I didn’t draw the thief from last night. It’s too dangerous.”

He leans over and kisses me. “You’re cute when you worry.”

“Ryker, I’m serious. I’m scared. I don’t want you up there.”

Octavia walks into our room without knocking, her gaze locking onto us like a laser. “Go ahead, Ry. I got this.”

Got this? Got what? Me?

Ryker pulls me close and wraps his arms around me. “Don’t worry. There are enough ravenborn here to fight an army.”

“But—”

He places his finger over my lips. “It’s okay. We know what to expect. We’re prepared. Nothing is going to happen to me, or Octavia, or anyone else. We’re the descendants of gods, Dani. And we’re prepared. Trust me.”

Damn it. I can’t argue with him when he is looking at me like that. And I can’t let him leave without telling him the truth. “I love you, Ryker. If you get yourself killed, I’m going to be super pissed off.”

“Now you tell me.” He kisses me again and I kiss him back with everything I’m feeling. Love, fear, hope, nerves. I’m raw and exposed, and I just handed my heart and soul to this man on a silver platter. When he lifts his head, I fight the urge to pull him back down for more.

Our eyes lock and hold.

“I love you, Dani. We’ll get through this.”

“Okay.” What else can I say?

He releases me and looks at Octavia, who is staring basically anywhere but at us. “Make sure she gets there in one piece and then come find me.”

“You got it.”

When he looks like he wants to say more, Octavia grabs his shoulder and pushes him toward the door. “She’s your heart, Ry, so she’s mine, too. Trust me. I won’t let anything happen to her. I will get her to the ceremony and make sure she’s got the toughest ravenborn around her at all times.”

“Thanks.” He walks to the door and looks back at the two of us. “Pray for me.”

Octavia tilts her head to one side. “To which gods?”

“All of them. I’ve got to go meet with my mother.”

When he’s gone, Octavia and I turn to face one another. The moment is surreal given all I know about her now. She studies me with acceptance in her eyes.

“He really does love you.” She makes it a statement, not a question.

“Did he tell you that?”

“Yes.”

No games from her. I reply in kind. “He loves you, too.”

“I know. But not like that.”

“No, not like that.”

She stares at me like she’s waiting for me to say something. “What?”

“Do you love him? I mean, are you really in love with him?”

“Yeah. I am.”

She takes a deep breath and blows it out like she’s been holding it inside forever. “Good, because I really didn’t want to have to kill you.”

“Is that a joke?”

“Sure.” She plops down on my sofa, and I realize she’s already dressed for the ceremony. A dark green bodysuit covers her from head to toe, with matching green slippers on her feet.

“Does that bodysuit go on under the dress?” I’ve seen that kind of thing on television, skirt overlay and a suit beneath, so the person wearing it can change the look without changing clothes.

“How did you—?” She blinks at me, confused, but figures things out quickly. “The visions? I was wearing a green dress when you saw Ryker die?”

“Yeah, that exact color.” I look down at my lounge pants and t-shirt. Crap, I need to change. I head for my bedroom, but the truth wiggles out of my mouth on the way.

“You look gorgeous in the dress, by the way. Stunning.” What kind of truth bomb did Ryker plant in my head? I literally couldn’t resist. Am I going to be spouting things like that for the rest of the night?

“Thanks.” She gets up and picks up one of my discarded drawings, trying to smooth the wrinkles from the paper.

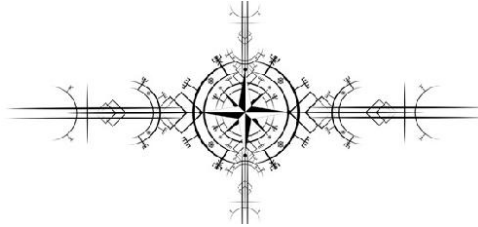
“Good luck with that.”

She looks up at me with a grin. “Hurry up. I have to make sure you and Beth—”

“And Nini!” Beth calls from her bedroom. “Her parents are waiting for her.”

“And Nini, arrive safely and on time.” She looks down at her green bodysuit and frowns. “And we need to make a side trip. I have to change.”

FORTY



Octavia delivers us to the ceremony, hands Nini off to her parents, and then leads Beth and me through the crowd to Zelik, who saved us a couple of seats. Which is a good thing, because the place is packed with finely dressed guests. The buzz of excited voices fills the space and I try to wrap my head around both graduating and making a life or death commitment in the span of ten minutes.

The idea is terrifying.

I look around, high and low, and see ravenborn everywhere. So many of the warriors are here, I wonder if the queen left a single ravenborn at the palace.

I hope not. Their presence is comforting, and I begin to relax. So far, nothing I'm seeing is anything like my visions. The center platform is decorated for the ceremony, and I am pleased to see that Ryker really did listen to every word I said. The decorations look new and completely unfamiliar. The colors of everything, from the chairs the queen and Attie will sit on, to the pillows where bonded pairs will kneel for their ceremony, are different as well.

"Well?" Beth asks.

I nod and can't hold back a smile. "It's all different. I can't believe they did that."

Zelik, seated on my right, leans around my shoulder to speak to Beth, who is on my left. "Ry told me they even painted a new design on the main wall."

On cue, we all turn our heads as far as possible to stare at the new image of a dark-haired Valkyrie holding a spear. “How did they do that? A mural that big would take months.”

Beth chuckles. “You’re such a mortal. Not all of our gods are like Thor and Odin. We have artists and poets, too.”

“A legacy did that? In less than a week?”

“Yeah. Isn’t it cool?”

Zelik nudges me with his elbow. “Hey, there’s Ry.”

I look toward the stage to see Ryker walking in as escort to his mother on one arm and Attie on the other. He guides them to cushioned seats and sits on his mother’s right. The queen is not what I expected. For some reason, I imagined she would be like Attie. Other than a killer white pantsuit and perfectly styled hair, she’s nothing like her. Attie is small and huggable. The queen looks like she’s at least as tall as her son. Her face is long and lean, just like her body. Her hair is so pale it’s almost white. Only their eyes are the same. Ryker got his mother’s eyes.

Astavar appears next. Behind him are an assortment of officials, politicians, teachers, and Chamber members. “There’s going to be more people crammed on that little stage than out here in the seats.”

The ceremony is like most of these things: long, monotonous, and boring. As each student receives their diploma, a small section of the audience cheers. They cheer again when the legacy and ravenborn complete the bond. There’s lots of handshaking and then they’re on to the next.

By the time Astavar calls Octavia and Ryker to the front of the stage, my ass is numb from sitting for so long. But this is the prince, so everyone cheers. The queen is on her feet with a giant smile on her face as she claps with the rest of us.

Octavia—who looks beautiful in a sleek black gown—and Ryker hand off their diplomas and walk forward to kneel for the bonding.

I can barely breathe as Ryker holds out his arm. The queen lifts a small blade and slices along his forearm, then repeats

the action with Octavia. Their grins are genuine as they reach over the center chalice and clasp one another's forearms, the idea being their combined blood will fall into the cup.

I wonder what god demands that offering.

All the other students' bonds were officiated by Astavar, but Ryker told me that since a man stabbed him in my vision, his mother insisted on doing the honors.

The queen raises her arms over their heads and begins the chant I've heard so many times tonight I have it memorized.

The entire room chants with her as Ryker and Octavia speak the words that will bind their divine energy together until one of them dies. I chant as well, even though the words are in a language I don't know, and I have no clue what I'm saying.

When the last words have been spoken, the room erupts in celebration. Ryker takes Octavia by the hand, and they step forward, facing the crowd as a powerful new bonded pair.

Zelik lifts one hand to his mouth and releases an ear-splitting whistle. Beth is clapping and shouting. I'm watching Ryker.

Something's wrong. He's smiling, but it doesn't reach his eyes. Octavia looks like she's about cry.

A scream comes from the back of the room.

A second scream comes from my right, near the highest row of seats. I jump to my feet as a third scream sounds, then a fourth. Like dominoes falling, the desperate cries come one after another as the crowd rushes around trying to figure out what's happening.

Zelik grabs my elbow and shoves me toward Beth. "Go. Move. We gotta move."

A sinking pit opens in my stomach. I look up at the stage and nearly cry with relief when I see Ryker standing with Octavia, unharmed.

Like a pot of water coming to a boil, pandemonium erupts. Everywhere, people run, panicked, screaming as they race for

the exits with their children in their arms.

Zelik is herding us toward a side exit when one voice cuts through the chaos, clear as a bell. Beth and I exchange a look and say her name at the same time.

“Nini.”

We race to the source, shoving our way through the rush of people trying to get to the doors.

Nini kneels next to two corpses, shaking them and trying to wake them up. Her face fractures into relentless sorrow as her cries fall on deaf ears. “Mommy? Daddy?”

Oh, fuck.

Her parent’s assassins are still kneeling over their bodies, each dipping a crystal pendant in their victim’s pooling blood. The crystals are glowing red as they chant some sort of spell.

The magic they’re using makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I free the dagger I had hidden in my boot and point it toward the killers. Whatever they are doing is wrong. Very, very wrong.

Screams sound behind us, but I can’t take my eyes off the two killers.

Tears stream down Nini’s cheeks as she shakes her parents, begs them to wake up, over and over again.

The two killers finish their unnatural chanting, pocket the red crystals, and stand to leave. Zel shoves Beth behind him as he moves to block their escape, blades in hand. “Where do you bitches think you’re going?”

“Get out of our way, little boy.” The woman who spoke glances from Zelik to me. Her lip curls in disgust when she sees my small knife. “Don’t make me kill you, Dani.”

How does she know my name?

“No!” Nini is on her feet behind them, her parents’ blood staining her puffy, golden dress. Rage fills her eyes. Power builds inside her, so strong I can feel it.

“Nini, stop!” I shout, but my screams can’t reach her. The chaos around us drowns out my voice.

I take a step toward her but stop when her eyes glow a startling red and she unleashes her rage.

Her scream takes us all to the floor, clutching our skulls in pain. The inhuman shriek scrapes the inside of my head like claws.

When Nini stops, I look up and discover all that’s left of her parent’s killers is a splatter of blood and gore on the walls.

Beth rushes to Nini, squeezing her so tightly it looks like she’s the only thing keeping our young friend from falling apart.

I stumble to my feet. “Beth!” I close the distance between us and grab onto Beth’s arm. “Beth, get Nini out of here! Go! Now!”

My instincts are screaming at me to get to Ryker. If he’s hurt, I have to be there to heal him.

Beth picks Nini up and runs toward an exit.

I turn to Zelik, who appears to be analyzing the chaos. “Where are all the ravenborn? What happened to the extra security?”

“Those two *were* ravenborn. They were her parents’ bonded protectors.”

“What?”

He lifts his chin, indicating a seating area across from us where two women are fighting one another with knives. “Her attacker is ravenborn.” He tilts his head to the side, where a young man is trying, and failing, to avoid a ravenborn’s spear. He points to yet another battle. “That’s ravenborn on ravenborn.”

“They’re killing each other?”

“And us.”

Everywhere I look, if there’s a dead body, there’s a ravenborn standing over the corpse with one of those glowing

crystal pendants in their hands. “What are those red crystals?”

“I don’t know. But if ravenborn are killing their bonded... you don’t think Octavia...?”

“Don’t say it.” I take off running as fast as my legs will carry me, begging my muscles to move faster.

We were with Nini for no more than a minute, but during that minute, all hell broke loose. I watch people around the hall drop where they stand, daggers through their hearts. Many of the killers are dressed in formal wear, no remorse in their eyes, as they loom over their victims and continue their spells.

Screams of unbridled terror fill the space. Mothers grab their small children and run toward the exits; students freeze in a confused panic.

We’re swept along in the crowd as everyone moves at once, but I know the doors are locked.

These people are going the wrong way.

I fight against the flow, shoving past one shoulder at a time. I keep shoving, forcing my way toward the raised platform in the center of the hall, toward Ryker, who is defending his mother from an oncoming attacker. Attie and Mirre are nowhere to be seen.

“Dani, wait! Stop!” I feel Zelik’s hand on my shoulder as he comes up next to me. “I’ll get you to Ryker. Stay close, right behind me.”

I nod and let him step in front of me to lead the way.

Zelik starts to shout, the sound more like a war cry than any words. His hands come up and I see them crackling with sparks of electricity.

The first bolt of lightning makes me jump. The ravenborn he hit, however, goes flying.

I ignore the sticky, wet pools of blood we step in as I stay close behind him. If I have to, I’ll swim in blood to get to Ryker.

Attackers rush us, one after another. The moment Zelik sees them, they're hit by a lightning bolt. Some I recognize as ravenborn, but there are also men I've never seen with strange little sigils on their uniforms. Are they the Servants of Seidr?

We're finally close enough to see the stage. Relief floods through me as I see Ryker, alive and well, his arm wrapped protectively around his mother. She shakes off his arm and I can't tell what they're shouting to each other, but it looks like Ryker is trying to get his mother to leave and she's refusing to go.

What the hell is she doing? She should have been rushed out of here the moment the first scream sounded.

But by whom? Ravenborn? "This is so messed up." I am suddenly very glad I didn't choose one of them to bind myself to. If I had, I'd probably already be dead, with a dagger through my heart.

"Oh, shit." Zelik stops abruptly and I run into the back of him.

I look up. Octavia and Astavar are both in a defensive stance, squared off against each other. Octavia stands between her father and the queen.

Astavar's eyes are maniacal as he waves a gold blade with a ruby in the hilt back and forth, ready to attack at any moment. Octavia's arms are covered in small cuts, blood seeping down into her dress from the wounds her father has inflicted. Why is Astavar still standing? If Octavia wanted to, she could knock him out in the blink of an eye, especially now that she's been bonded. Can she not stomach the thought of hurting her own father?

Octavia lunges for the blade. Astavar sidesteps and shoves her away so forcefully she goes sprawling to the floor. Apparently, Astavar does not have the same reservations about hurting family.

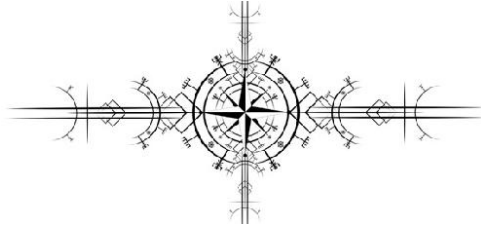
"No!" Octavia's scream falls on deaf ears as Astavar races toward Ryker and the queen.

They turn toward him at the sound, their faces full of shock and horror.

In one smooth stroke, Astavar cuts the queen's throat.

Before her body begins to sway, he shoves the bloodstained blade directly into Ryker's heart.

FORTY-ONE



“No.” Zelik’s softly spoken denial holds us both in thrall as we watch the queen fall and Ryker stare down at the weapon protruding from his chest.

Just like in my visions, Ryker drops to his knees, his hands wrapped around the hilt of the blade as a crimson stain spreads on his shirt.

He looks straight at me, almost as if he knows exactly where I am in the frenzied crowd. Our eyes lock and a scream builds inside me when I see both agony and regret staring out at me.

He believes he’s going to die. I saw it happen. I told him about my visions, and now he believes his fate is sealed.

“No!” I try to will him to fight, to hang on. I don’t want to break this fragile connection, but I have to if I want to have any chance of getting to him. “Zelik! Get me up there. I can heal him.”

Zelik doesn’t argue, shooting lightning at anyone and anything that gets in our way. Bodies fly before him like he’s a tidal wave of destruction as I scream warnings to the few legacies unlucky enough to be in our path. “Get down! Move!”

From the corner of my eye, I see movement coming from the side. I turn in time to dodge a knife flying in my direction. I thank everything that’s holy that I spent so much time in the gym with Ryker and Zelik as a tall, older ravenborn woman towers over me. “We’ve been looking for you.”

Zelik is moving farther away, unaware of the fact that he's leaving me behind. "Zelik!" I scream his name, but I don't think he hears me.

I drop into a defensive stance as the ravenborn and I face off, circling one another. I don't have a weapon and I hope like hell I'm fast enough to survive the hatred I see in her eyes. I can't die here. I won't. Ryker needs me.

She leaps at me, swinging her blade. I jump back as her sword arcs in a deadly swing, nearly gutting me.

Fuck.

My vision blurs and a wave of dizziness makes me stumble.

No. Not now.

I shove the vision away even as the familiar, skull crushing pain slams into my head.

I blink and it's too late, the tip of the ravenborn's blade knicks the skin of my exposed neck.

Without warning, a lightning bolt hits the ravenborn warrior and sends her soaring. She slams into the wall, her body cracking the gilded stone, and collapses, unconscious, on the ground.

Zelik runs up to me. "Hurry. Come on." A lightning bolt forms in his hand and he tosses it at a ravenborn on the other side of the room.

Someone slams into us from behind and it's like we're downed as if we were giant bowling pins. I hit the ground with a grunt of pain and watch as Zelik slides across the floor, coming to a halt a good distance away from me, unconscious.

I look for Ryker. He's lying on his side, looking in my direction, but his eyes are blank and unfocused. "Hold on!"

Getting back on my feet, I start toward Ryker, but the long wooden part of a spear sweeps my feet out from under me, and I crash into the ground, face first. I struggle to my hands and knees when a large boot slams into my side like a sledgehammer. Someone is kicking me. Hard. The force of the

blow flips me onto my back. Before I can recover, a boot presses down on my chest, holding me in place.

I groan in agony and look up into the eyes of a ravenborn guard dressed in ceremonial black and gold armor. This one I recognize. I've seen her around the school grounds. What the hell?

I grab her ankle and try to shove her booted foot off my chest, but I have a bad angle and she's a lot stronger than she looks.

"You can't save him." A golden sword manifests in her other hand as she stares down at me. "You can't save any of them." She holds the tip of a spear under my nose, her booted heel threatening to crack my ribs as she turns her head, calling out to someone.

I turn to see who she is talking to and, as though he literally stepped out of a dream, the thief from last night appears at her side. "Thank you, Skadi."

She nods, stepping back to allow him access to me. He reaches down and grabs me by my shirt, lifting me off the ground. "Come along. We have work to do."

He pulls me back to his chest and wraps one hand around my waist. With the other, he presses a knife to my throat.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

He lifts me off my feet and carries me toward the stage, toward Ryker, which is exactly where I want to go. As soon as we are on the platform, he drops me directly into a pool of royal blood. The thick liquid soaks into my clothing and coats my palms as I crawl to Ryker and gently turn him over.

His skin is clammy and cold. He is as pale as a ghost, his lips turning blue, his skin gray. I have more blood on my clothes than he must have left in his body. His eyes stare, unmoving and unseeing, at the ceiling above. I put my ear to his chest. His heart is beating, but barely.

"Ryker, I'm here. Don't leave me."

“Kill her!” Astavar’s order sends a chill down my spine. I look up as two ravenborn, eyes focused on me, lift their swords, ready to follow his order.

The thief steps in front of me, blocking their path. “Don’t touch her.” He lifts a hand toward Astavar and issues an order of his own. “Give me the crystal. Now.”

Keeping one eye on the interaction, I lift a hand to Ryker’s chest and reach for the only power I have. Warmth rises within me, and I push some of that heat into Ryker’s body, just enough to ease his breathing but not wake him up. I don’t want him to suffer while I try to figure out what to do about the blade lodged in his chest.

The thief is speaking, chanting words I can’t understand. I ignore him and slide a hand under Ryker’s back. My fingertips wander, discovering a sharp tip. The sword has gone clean through Ryker’s body.

I’m afraid pulling it out will hurt him more, but I don’t know what else to do. I move into position over Ryker and wrap my hands around the hilt. I’ll pull it out and blast him with healing energy as fast I can. It’s his only chance.

The thief returns, crouching at Ryker’s side, watching me with a detached expression. He holds a crystal pendant in his hand. Ignoring me completely, he lowers the crystal into the pool of blood around Ryker before lifting his gaze to meet mine. “What are you waiting for? Do it. Heal him.”

This is a trap, a trick. I know it, but I don’t have a choice.

I pull, a sob escaping as the sword comes free. Ryker is so far gone, he doesn’t move, doesn’t react. I’m afraid he didn’t feel it at all.

I set the sword down, within reach, and place my shaking hands on top of Ryker’s chest. I search for the heat in my gut. Power ripples through me and my insides burn with fire. The warmth moves from my core to my chest and down my arms. But it doesn’t flow into Ryker’s body.

Like a siphon pulling water from a pool, the crystal pendant absorbs the healing meant for Ryker’s body.

What the hell? I try again. The healing energy moves into the pendant and Ryker fades. I look at the thief. “What is this?”

His gaze is steady, matter of fact. “Old magic. Vanir magic. *Our* magic, Dani.”

Astavar steps forward and slaps me so hard I fall and end up sprawled on the floor at Ryker’s feet. “It’s done. Give it to me, Caldur. Now.”

The thief, Caldur, lifts the pendant in front of his face, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction as the pendant’s soft glow grows stronger with each passing moment.

“This doesn’t belong to you, Astavar. I suggest you leave while you can.”

“That belongs to Octavia! She is his ravenborn.”

Caldur scoffs. “You’re a fool. The prince is already bonded to Dani. Has been since the first time she healed him.”

“No! I did this for Octavia! For her mother!” Astavar’s face is turning a mottled purple, his fury absolute.

Ignoring Astavar, Caldur gets to his feet and walks to me. He forces me to my feet. “Let’s go.”

“No. I won’t leave him.” I don’t understand any of this. I tug against his hold, but Caldur doesn’t let go. Instead, he begins dragging me away from Ryker. “What are you doing?”

“Setting you free.”

“No.” I have to heal him. I wrench away from Caldur’s grip and go to Ryker. Heal him. I have to heal him. Why isn’t it working?

Caldur grabs me from behind, dragging me away with more intensity than before. Rage screams inside me and I throw my body into Caldur’s much larger frame, sending us both tumbling to the ground.

He’s a man, and twice my size, but somehow, I manage to hold my own. We roll, each trying to gain the upper hand. I

feel like I'm fighting a death match, so the very last thing I expect to hear coming from my opponent is laughter.

“Astavar told us you couldn't access your power. I see he was wrong.” He smiles as if my struggles please him. “You're already stronger than the rest of them.”

Stronger than the rest of who? And why was this man talking to Astavar about me?

As if thinking of him called him to us, Astavar appears. He grabs Caldur and throws him away from me like he would toss a mangy dog. The pendant flies out of Caldur's hands, landing near Ryker's feet.

Astavar lunges for it, no longer concerned with Caldur. He leans over and grabs the pendant, closing his fist around it.

Caldur climbs to his feet. He looks as if he's going to attack me—or Astavar—again, but Octavia leaps in front of me. “Another day.” He turns away, slipping into the chaos below and disappearing as if he were never there.

The world moves around me as if in slow motion. I look back at Ryker. I have to get to him, heal him—or revive him—before it's too late.

Astavar stands over Ryker's body with the pendant in one hand and the sword he used to kill Ryker in the other. The gold sword. The one with a ruby in its hilt.

Vision after vision stack atop one another in my head, and so do the emotions that came with them. Fear. Hopelessness. Despair. Loss. Rage.

I don't think. I charge full speed at Astavar, tackling him to the ground. In one swift motion, he flips me onto my back and pins me to the floor, looming over me. I see the sweat pouring down his face, and the beads of perspiration on his forehead.

Pure hatred stares at me from behind his eyes. “There's no way you're getting in my way today.” He is heaving, his grip like iron on my arms. “You're lucky I'm not allowed to kill you.”

Not allowed?

“Fuck you.” I smash his ugly face with my forehead. Astavar hisses in pain and falls back, blood pouring from his very broken nose. I scramble across the floor, trying to reach Ryker. I barely touch him when Astavar grabs my foot and drags me across the floor.

“You will not save him. Not this time.”

I kick and twist, fighting his hold, but I can’t break free. “Let me go!”

“He dies. That was the agreement.”

Astavar is out of his mind.

“Let her go.” Octavia shoves her dad back, breaking his hold on me.

I’m on my feet, moving faster than I thought possible. I whirl, executing a perfect kick, and slam my boot into his gut.

He doubles over as both sword and pendant fall to the ground.

He lunges for the pendant, and I kick him again, the blow coming up under his shoulder, sending him into a sprawl on his back. “Don’t make me kill you.” I’m not a killer, that’s not who I want to be. But I will.

“No, Dani!” Octavia begs.

Astavar looks surprised that Octavia would seek to protect him. I’m not. He really doesn’t know his daughter.

When he once more looks at me, the venom I see in his eyes is shocking. “This is a mistake, Miss Price. You’ll see. You’re one of us now. Nothing more than a dog on a leash.”

Zelik rushes up with two others and wrestles Astavar to his knees.

With a nod to my friends, I pick up the sword and pendant and return to Ryker. I don’t know what the fuck to do with either, so I put them next to me and spread my hands across Ryker’s chest once more.

Mustering every ounce of will I have, I concentrate on him, on the way he smiles, the way it feels when he touches

me. I replay our time together like a movie in my mind and demand the energy inside me respond.

The surge of power is like an explosion, and I shove it all at Ryker's chest.

A blast of light comes from the pendant as it steals every bit of power from me, from him.

No.

I can't lose him. Not here. Not like this.

Suddenly, I know exactly what I need to do.

I lift the sword and hold it hilt down and place the pendant into position. It's just like a hammer hitting a nail, right?

I bring the sword down as hard as I can. The crystal shatters, the red shards losing all color as they settle on the floor.

The energy that was bottled up inside the pendant bursts through me like I just detonated a grenade. A massive wave of power slams into my chest. Not wasting any more time, I lay my hands on Ryker.

He's not breathing. His heart stopped beating. But for how long? I refuse to believe it's too late.

I can save him. I will save him.

Brilliant gold light explodes from me. Burning hot power flows into Ryker's body with such force it causes him to jolt like he's being hit with electricity.

I don't stop. I can't stop. He must live.

When his body has taken all the energy it needs, the power doesn't stop, only shifts direction, surrounding me in a warm cocoon.

The air crackles with electricity. My skin is hot, like it's burning.

I glance down at my chest and watch in awe as beautiful gold and silver armor shimmers for a moment, like a mirage, before solidifying, completely covering my chest and

shoulders. The armor glitters, so bright it's as if the light comes from within. The armor spreads to cover my entire body and is so light it's like I'm wearing nothing at all.

Two wings as dark as the night sprout from my back, stretching outward and gleaming an iridescent purple and green in the torchlight.

Ryker gasps as he takes his first breath and I lean in, close. I want to be the first thing he sees when he opens his eyes.

To be continued...

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COMING SOON!



KARINA BANKS

LOVE WILL
END US

2

ACADEMY FOR GODS AND FREAKS

ABOUT KARINA

Karina Banks is the pseudonym for two dedicated creatives.

Karina lives, works, and goes to school in Boston, MA. She is a college student, songwriter, rock climber, pianist, and can normally be found sipping a cup of Earl Grey tea - with milk and sugar, of course. Karina began writing new scenes for her book as a means to procrastinate doing her “real” homework. If you live in Boston, you might catch her riding the T, or frequenting a nearby boba location. *I've Watched You Die* is her first novel. Her writing partner is a USA Today bestselling author who prefers to remain anonymous.